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RENOVATIONS AND OTHER STORIES

by

AMANDA RENE LAGER
B.A. University of South Carolina, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Renovations and Other Stories is a linked collection of ten fiction stories that examines the ways by which women renew or restore themselves. The collection is set in the imaginary city of St. Clair, South Carolina, a town balancing historical accuracy with the sensational tourist industry; Carolinians who trace their ancestries back to the American Revolution with suburban newcomers; and the notion of cherishing the past with moving forward. Many of the characters struggle with identity, whether it is regional or feminine individuality. The protagonists must challenge self-image when faced with situations that make them reconsider their places in their marriages, schools, jobs, and in their lives.

Relationships among women, especially mother-daughter bonds, are an important motif throughout the collection. These stories cover the lifetimes of two generations of Carolinian women. A baker struggles to break free of her Northern transient upbringing. A history student yearns to escape her past as a victim of bullying to form a new, confident identity while saying goodbye to her estranged mother. Another girl explores the confused social politics of the South which alienate her from a childhood friend. I intend to examine, through fiction, how people come to appreciate one another, often a moment too late, and how sometimes we completely misunderstand ourselves.

To my grandfathers, Pat and Sam, who could not see through the completion of this thesis.

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RENOVATIONS

For the fifth morning in a row, Eve awoke in bed alone. She watched as the sunrise brought the furniture into contrast, the dresser a different shade of gray than the carpet or the lamp or the mirror. Glen's body should have been a dark shadow outlined against the window, but all night there'd been no steady, gentle breathing to match hers. She threw back the comforter and gathered enough courage to walk. Then, she descended the wooden stairs covered by the red carpet runner, passed through the high-ceilinged dining room, and entered the equally large kitchen. The stainless-steel appliances and blue-gray paint made the room feel like a factory in Georgetown, not a historic Single House in downtown St. Clair. Now, the gap between her preference and her husband's was more evident by the bitter taste that formed on the back of her tongue each time she opened the fridge.

Routine guided her through these mornings. Eve filled the tea kettle out of habit, not knowing how many changes she could stomach at once. While she waited for the kettle to whistle, she retrieved the newspaper from the mailbox. The whole week, Eve was up before her neighbors. Later on, they would pass by with dogs or on the way to work or jogging, but, for now, the cobblestone street was empty. Each day started sooner, sunrise a minute earlier each day her husband remained absent. Longer days promised a renewed thickness of the air and green in the garden. Humidity and Spanish moss weighed down the oak tree on her front lawn. Eve's limbs felt as heavy as its branches.

On the piazza, Eve found a blue envelope leaning against a candle, the porch's sole decoration. Her name was written across the envelope in Glen's blocky, capital-letter script. Eve eased into one of the rocking chairs as she debated ripping open the letter. Five days of waiting,

and she was afraid to hear what excuse Glen could offer for himself. Good news or bad, it wouldn't wait with her on the porch for time to pass and her emotions to calm down. She paused between each tear, afraid to damage the letter inside. The sheet of hotel stationary, from a chain that catered to the swarms of tourists and which sat only blocks away from their house, revealed little. He gave her no answers, no explanations, only directions that he and his lawyer would stop by the following day to pick up his clothes and to clean out his study.

Wind toyed with the tips of the dormant azaleas and jessamine in the garden, plants Eve's mother-in-law, Queenie, had tended while she was alive. The tea kettle whistled. Eve turned off the burner, tossed a couple bags in the water to steep, and returned to the porch. Cars sputtered past. The occasional lost tourist met her gaze as he admired her neighborhood. The house at her back slept.

#

Queenie had met them on the porch when Glen first brought Eve home. She'd sat in a rocking chair, fanning herself with a folded housekeeping magazine, and watched the condensation drip from her glass of tea. Though Eve wore a dress and some makeup, she looked frazzled compared to how put-together Queenie was—a beautiful dress, sleek curled hair, not a chip in her pink fingernail polish. Eve wanted to sink through the porch steps, sink through the cobblestone and the dirt right into the water rushing from the river out to the Atlantic.

Glen bounded up the steps and hugged his mother, leaving Eve on the lawn. She folded her hands behind her back and laced her fingers together. She had little family pedigree compared to her boyfriend's, nothing that would impress Queenie. True, Eve was as much a Carolinian as any Demerest, her ancestors stretching so far back there was no telling when or from where they had come. Eve had been raised in the St. Clair suburbs, yet even she had heard

about Queenie, notorious around town for her airs. Everyone had a mental image of Queenie lording over her porch, suitable to her nickname, which wasn't really a nickname at all—her middle name, Queen, passed down on her mother's side hadn't fit a little girl, so they'd added an extra syllable and the name stuck.

Glen and Eve had only been dating six months, and they hadn't yet said *love*. They'd met at a party and become a typical inseparable couple when they were not busy with class or homework. They both studied business, but Glen was more successful, his higher aims driving him to attempt perfection. His ambition was enviable. With his connections around St. Clair, he had no problem lining up a job after graduation. Eve had just wanted out of the classroom.

Eve climbed the steps and focused on the back of Glen's head. Glen was handsome in a way. His black-rimmed glasses and dark hair lent him all the usual mysterious qualities of men who shouldn't be introduced to parents. He looked down at his mother, who was a whole head shorter than him.

Eve's handshake was too firm. Queenie lightly placed her right hand on top of Eve's.

"What can I get y'all to drink?" Queenie asked. Her smile seemed to glow with the knowledge of every bit of Eve's life up to that moment and what Eve would or would not amount to in the future.

#

Eve's cell phone buzzed. She released a held breath when she saw the message was from Lorena, who wanted to meet at her office for lunch. Lorena had texted Eve multiple times per day after Glen's disappearance, after Eve had turned off her phone and the television and had hidden from the world. Half of the same first-semester college courses and a dorm room together had made them best friends. Lorena would just *know*. Maybe Lorena had even seen it coming,

but had decided not to tell Eve out of devotion. But Glen and Eve hadn't fought even over what color to paint the banisters, what nights to order take-out Chinese. They didn't do much of anything together, to be honest. Eve had thought that was what marriage was, getting to know all of someone and growing so comfortable that words were unnecessary.

But she had been wrong.

The best moments of her marriage had been those spent in the living room, Glen writing reports for the bank and Eve reading the newspaper or brainstorming a new layout for the art gallery. She lit candles around the room and stared into their glow until they burnt out, smothered by their own pools of wax. The sounds of the neighborhood, of people going about their lives, stood in for background music.

Eve smiled as the memory passed, at how bittersweet it all was. She peeked through the blinds. The day was clear, sunny and cloudless. A breeze blew across the lawn, from the viny jessamine scaling the mailbox, through the low-cut grass square that pretended to be a front lawn but was really no bigger than a compact car, to the oak on the far corner. Eve sent a message back to Lorena. She would make it to lunch.

Staring at her reflection in the hallway mirror, she fussed for a moment and pretended to care about her appearance. Society could judge her all it wanted for her gym pants and the careless swish of her ponytail. Queenie used to warn her about leaving the house unprepared, but Eve straightened her back and refused to go change for the ghost of her mother-in-law. Then, she grabbed her purse and keys. Eve walked the quiet streets away from the central square of St. Clair where the tourists and businessmen and -women dined on patios. She was not ready yet to reenter the world that way.

Students hurried over the brick walkways downtown. Lorena worked on the periphery of the campus in a converted house the history department took over. The overarching trees broke the pale blue sky into kaleidoscopic pieces. People walked to the trajectory of class schedules and extracurriculars and coffee shop study sessions. Eve admired their focused steps, their swinging arms, and eyes forward, while her attention was scattered all around her.

A girl talking on her phone knocked into to an elderly man, who measured his steps by the reach of his cane, and spilled her coffee on his pant leg.

Eve rushed to his side. “You all right?” she asked. She helped him regain his balance, used to all the times when she helped Queenie up and down the stairs near the end of the woman’s life.

The girl, unfazed by the incident, glared at them and kept on walking.

“I’m all right.” He situated his grip on the cane and studied Eve slowly, as if he were looking for someone else hidden underneath her skin. “Pretty girls like you don’t have to stop to help an old man like me. Go on.”

His glasses drooped on his nose, and Eve had a strong desire to push them up for him. Instead, she pulled napkins from her purse. “No, sir. These kids act like the city was put here for them. I imagine if my parents could have made it to your age, I wouldn’t appreciate someone spilling coffee on them.” When he had cleaned off as best he could, they walked together until they reached Lorena’s building. The drawl in his voice, the way he would take an entire minute to complete a sentence, pauses pregnant with the sorting of near a century of memories, was pleasing. She looked forward to seeing the old man sooner or later if he lived here.

Eve opened the iron gate and climbed the brick steps to the porch. As with many St. Clair businesses, this one used what space was available, houses converted into workspaces.

Sometimes Eve felt disarmed at the blurred boundaries between the personal and public. One would never suspect these buildings were anything but private residences without reading the placards hidden under the doorbells.

There were few people inside, most probably gone to lunch at one of the nearby dives. Eve closed her eyes and felt around the office through her other senses for the small instances of life around her. She hoped to store some of the activity for when she returned home to silence, little measures of existence to remind her that the world still functioned even if she took no part in keeping it moving. The computers and phones hummed. Footsteps tapped the tile upstairs. Cars sped past the row of buildings. Murmurs penetrated the walls.

An elbow poked her in the side.

“I hope sandwiches are fine, because that’s all I had time to get,” Lorena said.

Lorena was a short, dark, alluring woman. Her eyes and straight-set mouth were determined, like a woman who knew what she wanted and who went after it. Unlike Eve, Lorena put herself together each day in modern-cut clothing, all straight lines and bright blocks of color, nothing floral or willowy about her. Eve had seen her in enough dressing rooms to know that even her body subscribed to a belief in waste nothing, muscle and definition and a balanced grace. Lorena stood out, something more exotic than a belle, someone who would fit in fast-paced cities where people spoke multiple languages and fenced verbally long into nights. There was no way that her husband, Matt, would ever leave her.

“Still going to play shy after a week? Your boss leave you all by yourself again? No, that can’t be it cause you’re in sweats.” Lorena pulled the food from the take-out bags and placed an identical sandwich on either side of the desk.

Eve frowned and ran a hand through her hair as if in self-defense. The wrapper gave her a reason to stall. Jealousy and nervousness roiled through her stomach, circulating as if her body ran on extreme emotion. She could bottle it and sell it like oil for a car engine. When the four flaps were pushed aside, she ripped the sandwich into bite-sized pieces.

“Acceptance is the first step,” Lorena joked, as if Eve were going through nothing more than a bad phase.

“I watched a seventeen-year-old run over an old man. And Glen left me this letter.” Eve pulled the crumpled envelope from her purse. Lorena read. She turned the page over searching for more on the back. Then, she set the letter down and reached for Eve’s hand. Lorena squeezed the bread right out of her grip.

Lorena shook her head. “Had he said anything to you before?”

“I am as shocked as you are,” Eve replied and pushed a bite into her mouth. The turkey and apple chutney made her long for lunch breaks at the art gallery. Later, she would call Jo and maybe go to work on Monday. She focused on chewing instead of on the wrinkles on Lorena’s forehead.

“Does anyone else know?”

They took a few bites and watched the traffic outside.

“I’m so sorry, Evey. Let me know if we need to dump everything on the lawn and pour lighter fluid over it. That wouldn’t be outside city regulations, would it?” Lorena smiled.

Eve walked around the desk and hugged Lorena over the back of the chair. The chair swiveled, but Eve held on. She wished she could be brave enough to do something drastic. According to the letter, she got to keep all the heirlooms. Why *would* he leave all the silver and

the paintings that belonged to his family since the Revolutionary War? Lorena would kill to have access to the stuff tucked away in their cabinets collecting dust.

They talked about the lack of rain and celebrities the rest of the hour, easy topics that required no effort.

Over the walk home, Eve had too much to think about. How would Glen react the next day? Glen was not forcing her to move, but would her part-time art gallery job make her move anyway? Lorena was right that she needed to look deeper into her own circumstances, maybe even find out that they were not all that great to begin with.

The house needed cleaning so Eve threw away the evidence of microwave dinners and days spent in the living room staring at unlit candles. Though it filled her time, the cleaning was not a heavy chore, with neither husband nor family to add to the clutter of her inattention. Eve took the trash to the curb and wiped away the food stains on the counter, the glaring problems she would be embarrassed to let guests see, and ignored the rest. By dinner time, she fixed a salad and poured a glass of wine.

She thought back to her wedding day. Her parents had passed in a car accident, and Queenie had the job of escorting her down the aisle. Eve had stood admiring her wedding dress in the mirror. Lorena had gone ahead into the chapel. Queenie bent over the hem of Eve's lace gown, brushing it smooth with quick pats of her hand.

Apprehensive of the woman before, Eve felt perhaps now she and Queenie would grow to understand one another. Now that they both had married. Now that they were family.

"Queenie, were you happy with Mr. Demerest?"

The older woman looked up from where she was hunched over. Though she smiled, a tear sparkled in her eye before she hardened up again and went about her usual brisk caretaking.

“Marriage isn’t all about happiness or anger.” She hesitated as if measuring the weight of each thought as it entered her throat. “There are no words for it. It is what it is. You’ll see.”

Eve wanted to ask more, but Queenie stood and smoothed her suit jacket, the conversation finished. She offered her arm. Eve wrapped hers around the older woman’s forearm. Queenie smiled, just a quirk at the corner of her mouth, but it felt like a hint of approval.

#

Eve felt revived the next morning. No longer did her body feel as if it were pushing through water instead of air, her muscles constantly tensed. Basic tasks—cleaning after breakfast, watering the plants, dressing—felt natural again. She threw away shirts that she realized she had worn only to make Glen happy. She tuned the radio to pop music rather than talk shows hosted by men who took themselves too seriously. When she finished, Eve took her tea out on the porch. A stiff wind blew up from the bay and pulled at her blouse collar.

Glen’s car pulled onto the brick driveway at nine o’clock. A grim looking man in a dark suit sat on the passenger side. His horn-rimmed glasses did nothing to improve his overall appearance. Eve drew on her memories of Queenie welcoming outsiders into her home with more warmth than that reserved for family members. The ends of her skirt would sashay as she crossed the porch, the corners of her mauve-painted lips would draw into a smile. Eve steadied her rocking chair, waving to the men as they slammed shut the car doors.

The lawyer introduced himself when Glen remained silent. Eve returned his firm grasp with a tight squeeze.

“Would you like some tea?” Eve asked. “Glen, I think they’re your mother’s glasses.”

Glen narrowed his eyes, one of his *Don't bother me, I'm working* expressions, and said nothing. The lawyer, turning his head from husband to wife, shook his head. Glen marched upstairs to the two bonus rooms, which he and Eve had turned into offices.

Glen's room was dark at all times of the day. Navy-blue shades covered the two windows which Glen never opened once, not even to air the mustiness of dust and old books. The desk, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves along the right-hand wall, and the table to the left were all built from dark, heavy wood. The walls had been painted a light brown that seemed darker for the lack of sunlight. His room had always seemed misplaced as if it were lifted from an entirely different person's home and inserted in an unused corner. Now, it was simply a room. Soon, it would be an empty room.

As they exited into the hallway, the lawyer said, "I will need you to sign a few papers. Whenever you're ready."

"Isn't it unusual for a divorcé to want as little as Glen does? There's a good fortune in the place settings alone."

The lawyer straightened the starched white sleeves that peeked out from beneath his suit jacket. "My client has suggested that, due to his present generous income and his negative associations with his parents' effects, it might be more beneficial for you to have capital to hire a realtor, put the house on the market, and find a more suitable living condition."

His words made Eve's skin itch. "Why do you keep calling him 'my client?' At least call him Mr. Demerest. Anything more personal." She had not thought about moving and was not sure the idea settled well with her.

She took the twitch in his shoulder for a shrug.

“What about the kitchen? The entire room is new, custom ordered. The damn ventilation hood took six months to arrive.” Glen’s negative associations had nothing to do with his parents. He had admired their belongings—when he did not replace them. The lawyer’s face revealed no partiality. His mouth was a neutral line, his disinterest evident in his unmoving stance. His tone had been even and calm, but surely he had meant Eve when he’d spoken.

Eve retreated to let them pack and talk business. In such an old house, she would be able to hear their footsteps if they moved to any of the other rooms.

At last, the men came downstairs with the final boxes. The lawyer placed a stack of papers in her arms, then waited on the porch. Glen tapped the business card that was attached by a paperclip to the pile. “Call if you need anything. He can answer questions or settle...” The words became raspier as he spoke, until it seemed that Glen could not talk around his rote speech. He walked down the steps and toward the car with his box, and Eve could almost forgive him for not speaking.

When their car pulled out of the driveway, Eve shut the door. She covered her eyes with one hand, rubbing the numbness out of her temples from the strain of too many fake smiles. How could she keep the weight of the paperwork from undoing all the progress she had made? So much of her life had been laid out before her when she’d settled with Glen. Now, questions poked out of corners she did not know existed, right down to the type of tea she preferred and what television programs to turn on Sunday evenings. Her eyes fell on a picture of her mother-in-law baking in a kitchen that looked so different from the present one.

At a family reunion some years back, one of Glen’s cousins had told her that he felt sorry she’d married into Glen’s family. He had loosened his tie with one finger and had glanced around to see if the fifty-five-year-old woman would jump out from behind the corner with the

energy of a child. After helping her around the house, Eve had been well aware that Queenie couldn't surprise anyone anymore. If she sat in a chair too long, Queenie would hardly be able to stand up straight without Eve there to help her unfold her spine and knees. It was hard to equate memories of the imposing ruler of the St. Clair piazza with the Queenie back home on the couch.

"One time, I knocked Glen off his bike," the cousin said. "She made me pick my own switch from my gran's yard."

Eve imagined the frail woman she knew being strong enough to scare a grown man, but the truth was there, whipped into his hide and his memories. He had not been about to let anyone forget Mrs. Queenie's mean streak.

Now, Eve wanted to be the woman in that picture. Okay, maybe not the mauve lipstick, but the strength and the fragility, the fullness of personality that came from long evenings on the porch in a rocking chair bolstered by the love of an entire town.

Poison seeped from the wallpaper and the paint, traces of Glen's personality everywhere in what had been renovated since Queenie died. Eve went around the house opening doors and windows. The last room remaining was Glen's office. Out of habit, she almost knocked on the door. It brought to mind cleaning all of the small, shared places in their house where she discovered how intertwined two lives could be, even with Glen's best intentions for independence only overlapping at night in their marriage bed. Eve whisked aside the curtains and unlocked the windows. They stuck to the frame. Eve steadied her arms and pushed up with her legs. Some of the paint tore off in jagged edges, but the window opened.

#

The next day, Eve cleaned the attic. Boxes of paperwork she moved downstairs into the offices. Keepsakes and old furniture could be left upstairs. Glen had kept thorough records, just

as all his family had, Eve learned as she read file after file. Someone would have to help her sort his box into what she could keep and what was his. Queenie herself had another two boxes.

File folders were filled with handwritten receipts and magazine clippings of inspirations. Each room of the house had its own folder, complete with floor plans and information on the furniture and decorations. Eve looked at the plan for her office, which had been the guest room.

Eve rocked on the balls of her feet. A growing ache in her calves burned from squatting to analyze the contents of each box, but Eve stayed put.

Now she saw the house as a living thing, its own history of love and need taking root deep in Eve's heart, wrapping tendrils around and around until she was sure she had always loved this house. It wasn't an arm or a leg, but was still a part of her life that would be too painful to cut away. She would do everything to put it and herself to rights—starting with the kitchen. She opened an old tin, one of a pile of just-in-case boxes and wrapping paper, and placed items from their box, a photo of her and Glen on their honeymoon, the dried corsage of flowers Queenie had pinned in her hair on their wedding day, and a sky-blue necktie Glen had accidentally left mixed in her dirty laundry, now sparkling clean and ready to be retired for good. Along with the old, she sketched a rudimentary mockup of a new kitchen.

For reference, Eve laid the kitchen file and the picture of Queenie on the living room coffee table. She went to the garage wondering what tool would do the job best. Inside the door, she felt around for the light switch. As the light turned on, a glint caught Eve's eye. Glen's hammer winked from across the oil-covered concrete.

The wooden handle felt just right in her grasp. Before, it had been only a hammer, just a tool for hanging pictures and repairing splintered boards on the porch. Now, potential shone in its dull, gray surface.

Eve opened the refrigerator door. She gathered items to feed herself for a few days and placed them in a cooler. The remaining liquids she dumped down the drain, whole bottles thrown into garbage bags. When it was empty, Eve rolled the fridge forward and unplugged it. Then, she emptied the cabinets of the dishes she loved. The silver-rimmed plates with the doves went into the living room along with essentials and the Stein collection from their trip to Germany. She left the new china behind the cabinet doors' frosted glass panes.

Eve hit those panes first. The glass caved in, sprinkling flatware and the floor in glittering shards. She shielded her face in the crook of one arm and hit a second pane with the other, then a third with as much force as she could put into the hammer. The china rattled as she made her way down the line. Next, she smashed the dark wooden cabinets. Each swing enticed her. *Faster, harder*, it seemed to say.

A minute spent on the oven earned nothing more than dented drip pans, so she moved on to the fridge. Her blows hit a solid *thwap*. She struck again and again until the round full moons of the hammer's face covered both of the stainless-steel doors. There was real texture to the fridge now. The ice dispenser lever flew across the room and crashed into the sink. The water dispenser's rubber hose caught in the hammer claw, and water leaked from the hole left as Eve tore it away from the appliance.

When she had damaged every surface within reach, Eve set the hammer down and leaned over, hands on her knees, breathing in short pants. She retrieved a plastic cup with her alma mater's logo printed on the side and poured water from the faucet, the only intact fixture in the whole mess. Destroying it would have been a plumbing nightmare.

The doorbell rang. Eve brushed the hair from her face and walked toward the piazza.

Lorena stood with a plate of cookies sealed by pink plastic wrap. She pushed the cookies close to Eve's face. They smelled like chocolate and condolence. She paused and stared at the smudges of sweat and dirt all over Eve's skin. Adrenaline was working its way out of her system, and she felt self-conscious about the dust caked into her hair. Lorena was still piecing together the clutter just beyond the door, judging by her hunched shoulders and drawn eyebrows.

"Let me put these in the kitchen, then you are going to tell me every detail," Lorena said, spacing the last two words into their own sentences.

Eve didn't try to stop her. She shut the door as quietly as possible and heard Lorena say, "What the fuck happened in here?" Eve smiled and brushed the hair off her face and back into a ponytail.

Eve would forgive her less than ladylike speech. Eve paced her steps through the foyer, still processing the implications. She hooked a left through the living room, took a breath, and stepped into the reconstruction zone.

Her best friend stood in the doorway, hands hung at her sides, biting her lower lip. Lorena paced the room, checking on the walls and the structural details Eve would miss. "Well, I know you didn't find any Confederate funds or missing wills when Glen did this the first time around." Eve showed her the picture of Queenie in front of the oven and the file of all the floor plans.

"Remodeling," Eve said. She picked up the cookies from the chipped granite countertop. She opened the first cabinet door she came to, which fell off the one hinge that held it in place, and laid the plate on the uneven shelf.

“It’ll cost a fortune.” Lorena did calculations on her fingertips. Eve could rely on her to be the sensible one throughout this process, but for now, she needed the quiet, she needed the dust and the broken wood and the glass crunching beneath her sneakers.

“I have plenty of things to auction. Queenie wouldn’t mind a couch or necklace or two finding better homes. We didn’t love this place well enough.”

Eve grabbed the pitcher of tea from the cooler and two glasses from the dining room table, which she handed to Lorena. From the garage, she grabbed a trowel. Then she tucked the tin of memories under one arm and held Lorena’s hand with her free one. They left the house, and Eve led them to the garden. Under the azalea bush that bloomed with the brightest pink flowers, Eve dug a hole to fit the dimensions of the box, the good and the bad, so that the azalea would not be fertilized only by poison. Eve and Lorena filled the hole by hand and sat on the grass drinking tea and enjoying the first of many warm spring days.

UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

Lorena set the stack of papers on her desk and rubbed her temples. Another rewrite due. She would have to go back to her research, the figures from town hall records and newspapers saved to microfilm—newspapers people cared so little about that no one had bothered to digitize them. She'd learned so much about women during the Civil War that she wasn't quite sure anymore what she point she was trying to make about them, yet she'd promised herself a Ph.D. and she was much too stubborn to back down now.

The stacks of books and files on her desk threatened to topple on her lap. She couldn't find the computer mouse underneath all of the paper and had learned keyboard shortcuts instead of taking the time to clean. Her house might have been messy too if her husband, Matt, wasn't so willing to pick up her slack—or, more likely, bored at home by himself. Lorena took three long breaths from her diaphragm the way she'd learned in stress-management workshops in undergrad.

Lorena picked up the papers again then handed them to Allie, the other doctoral student who shared her office.

"Again?" Allie said. "You'll have enough for five books by the time you finish."

"When? I haven't cleaned my kitchen in weeks. I haven't gone on a date with my husband in months. Now it looks like I will be forty before I figure out what my angle is on this research."

"At least you don't have to come up with new lesson plans each semester. You'll have a permanent job teaching post-1800, if you want it."

Lorena looked at her watch. "Shit. I'm going to be late for my first class."

Alice handed back the chapter and turned again toward her computer. Lorena shoved the textbook in her messenger bag, grabbed her binder of presentation notes, then ran out the door. Campus wasn't sprawling though and her brisk pace took her from the converted three-story house that housed the history department to the lecture hall in five minutes. The straps of her pumps rubbed at her tendons. Her dress jacket was stuffy, but she didn't remove it. Suits were just about the only way to distinguish herself from her students. Twenty-five wasn't very old by any means, even if she did graduate early and start her dissertation in history right away. Being well-spoken and professional still only got you so far if your students still saw you as a peer.

She felt generous and waited five extra minutes before displaying the syllabus on the projector. First days were always the worst, and she found herself thinking more about her research and graduation than the words on the slides. Following the instruction on the last page, students pulled out notebook paper so she could collect information—mostly so she'd know what previous topics they'd need to review—and she studied the tops of their heads. Being in front of large crowds had made her nervous ever since grade school.

#

The house was empty when Lorena returned from the college. Her messenger bag weighed on her shoulder, full of student responses and a rejected dissertation chapter. St. Clair was warm for January. Her coat had hung in the closet since Christmas. The humidity had returned, the feel of water vapor signaling an early spring. She smiled at the sky-blue walls of her foyer and turned the thermostat to a more reasonable temperature. She enjoyed coming home to a place so light and airy, nothing like her mother's house with its brown wood paneling, orange shag carpets, and ceilings so low that Matt had to duck to get through some of the door frames.

Her cell phone chirped. She'd missed a call while driving. It was odd that her mother's neighbor, Maggie, would contact her in the afternoon. When Maggie did call, it was around meal times or when her favorite programs were on the television, hoping to recap her reality shows mere seconds after they disappeared from the screen. Lorena didn't have time to waste on TV. Matt kept the one they owned set to the twenty-four-hour weather service. When she was curious enough to see what sorts of entertainment she'd been missing out on, she could never get used to commercials blasting interruptions for products she had no interest in, the lack of focus programs required of viewers. Perhaps in that way, she was like her mother, loathe as she was to admit it. Board games and puzzles necessitated interaction, and Lorena loved to draw people together and talk until sunrise.

Lorena punched in a command and waited for the digitized voice to finish listing her options. The message only said, "Come home. It's your mother," the words evenly paced and the vowels long and smooth as any Southern country woman's, as if Maggie had been expecting such a thing to happen any day. None of her usual meandering talk, no worry or anger either. The voice was a simple command, one she expected would be followed with no argument. Lorena propped herself up with a hand on the hallway table and waited for shortness of breath or her heartbeat to quicken. Her only reaction was an ache between her eyes like she'd been staring at a computer screen too long. Lorena found it easier to concentrate on her dissertation to-do list rather than to spur up sadness from a hidden reserve of emotion for the woman who'd given birth to her. The list was something real and solid, not open for interpretation. After all, her mother had been in a coma for two years. She'd never been the ideal mother anyway—many times Lorena had to do the grocery shopping and had to drop off the electric bill at the utility

company's branch downtown when she'd come home from school to find nothing working.

Aloof didn't even come close to describing how out of this planet her mother had been.

Matt walked through the front door. As usual, he set his briefcase and keys down, then kicked his shoes into the hall closet. She could not tell if his nod was for her or some new tic he had picked up, so infrequently did they arrive home at the same time. She leaned against the banister and watched him. After five years together, she thought she should be tired of him, but school only made her miss his confident stride and his messy hair even more.

When he offered nothing in the way of hello, she said, "I think I have to take a few days off and go to Kershaw."

"Something new for the book?" he asked.

"Maggie called. If Momma hasn't passed yet, it'll be soon."

"I mean, she doesn't need to be comatose anymore. I know I wouldn't want to stay in a hospital that long."

Lorena nodded. Hell, she found it hard to be sad herself, so why should she be mad at Matt for his honesty? She'd admired that about him, his ability to say what he felt with no shame. Before college, it seemed all she'd felt was shame about being herself, about having desires. She'd had to learn bravery while he'd been born with it.

Matt opened his arms and she walked into them. She folded her arms stiff against her body, a wedge between their two chests. She wanted to hug him back, but didn't move.

"Should I go with you?" He released her and looked into her face, probably to judge if she was in shock.

"No."

"Should I fix dinner or call for take-out?" Just like that, he moved on.

“Whatever you want. I have to start rewriting that chapter.” Lorena tapped her school bag with her foot. It didn’t budge.

Matt sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Oh well, I brought home paperwork anyway. It’d be nice if you could graduate already.”

“Maybe Chinese. You could stick mine in the fridge. I’ll remember it at some point.”

“Sure.” Matt loosened his tie. He bent to his briefcase, picked up a file, and turned toward their living room. His back looked more familiar now than his face, his tense shoulders and the golden brown of his hair as he moved past each window more her company than his smiles.

Lorena picked up the phone and dialed Maggie’s number, thankful for muscle memory so that she didn’t have to retrieve an address book from the kitchen.

#

Lorena pounded her fist on the keyboard. A beep of protest squeaked from the machine. She pressed the *undo* button, and the unintelligible letter scramble disappeared. She’d stumbled around her first lecture of the semester until she couldn’t remember if Andrew Jackson was elected in 1824 or 1828 and sent them home fifteen minutes early. Her writing was making even less sense. She cleared the screen and flipped through the next chapters outlined in one of the identical spiral notepads she’d bought when she began her research, when she was still hopeful it would amount to something the layperson would care about, not just other historians. Everything in the world seemed to be so specialized nowadays that they should all be thrown in padded cells with their like “type,” left to babble on about how people constructed outhouses in 1830 versus 1850, when the normal person would only understand “shit.”

She realized now that there was a certain sort of irony to her obsession with historical fact. She’d criticized her mother for so long that Lorena had eclipsed her own vision from

noticing their similarities. At reenactments, Lorena would remain in the car while her mother and her mother's friends played dress-up in cotton work gowns, while men fired cannons, and lay for hours in the sun in their wool uniforms until the battle had been won—or lost, depending on the battle field—and they could stop playing dead. Academic conferences exuded the same level of excitement. Bottles of wine would be passed around tables while Lorena and her colleagues squabbled a minor point until all of their spouses had excused themselves for the night and the wait staff circled their tables. Usually she didn't think so poorly of her profession, but in light of her mother's weakening condition, she thought she should be asking questions. How important was her job, her dissertation, when her mother hadn't spoken, hadn't walked or eaten of her own volition in two years? When each person reminded Lorena of her mother, it was hard not to imagine her sewing a new dress or practicing dance maneuvers in their kitchen.

Images of hair and memories of her mother couldn't be separated from one another. A loose hair falling off a businesswoman's sleeve brought back memories of Rosamond at her desk weaving hair jewelry, one of her obsessive hobbies linked to the Civil War. The lamp above the round table focused twelve or sixteen strands placed at even intervals around a circle. Her mother's body placed in between the lamp and the doorway cast shadows on the bookshelves and the sewing table. Fanned in front of Rosamond, the hair channeled into the dark hole of the round table's center. To her right, on her project table, were her scissors and wires and cylinders of different thicknesses, aimed for precision of the weave, the magnifying glass for creating brooches of flowers and trees. Even a measurement as small as a quarter of an inch changed the pattern of bracelets and earrings from cable twist to flat or the texture of a tree trunk.

Lorena remembered toddling up to her mother's chair.

“Momma, I had a nightmare.” She’d say as she reached her arms out to be held. Her mother batted them away.

“You know they’re not real. The monsters go away as soon as you open your eyes.”

Her mother continued to wrap the hairs around the cylinder. The fiery copper caught all of the light in the room and funneled it into one point. Lorena wanted to touch it, but remembered the whipping she’d gotten the last time she’d tried. Just like the stove, the fire-red light meant something bad would come her way.

“Momma...”

“I’m working. What did I say about disturbing me while I’m working?”

“Can I have some water?”

Her mother clamped the different strands down and wrote on a piece of paper. She’d explained the reasons and orders for the numbers to Lorena, but they were too much to keep up with. Rosamond went to the kitchen, then returned with a glass of water. They walked to Lorena’s bedroom. When Lorena had sipped her water and Rosamond had tucked her in, Rosamond turned off the light and shut the door.

A light from down the hall lit the crack underneath Lorena’s door. She was not sure anymore whether the light could keep her safe from the monsters or not.

Sometimes Lorena sat at her desk in her small office and imagined herself as she once saw her mother. She bent close to the reading and admired the intricacies and confounding coincidence of human history as Rosamond bent toward locks of hair. Perhaps it was her mother’s fascination with a world long gone by that made Lorena understand the cause and effect of history, the lies, the story telling, the complete humanness of the trade of historical fact. And just as Rosamond would lay out her tools, perhaps for a bracelet of braded red-gold or

acorn-shaped earrings, Lorena prepared her lectures with care for detail, looking to cut through to the most basic of truths.

#

Early the next morning, Lorena smoothed back her brown hair with both hands, feeling the mass push into loose order, then fly out again as her fingers moved through the tips into thin air. The backlit computer screen had kept her company for the past hour. A headache pulsed behind her eyes, knots she couldn't reach to massage away. She waited for the alarm to ring in the bedroom next door. When it did, Matt fumbled with the comforter, slammed his hand once, twice, against the nightstand before hitting the alarm's reset button. She walked through his morning routine in her mind, while she clicked through websites in imitation of productivity. She could feel her handwriting devolving into chicken scratch that she would curse herself later for, but now it was enough for her hand to be in motion. When Matt went downstairs to microwave a bowl of oatmeal, Lorena came back to the present, alone in her office holding her breath.

The bedroom empty, Lorena crossed the hall toward their bedroom, brushing the wall with her fingertips, feeling the contours of molding then matte paint then air between door frames. Lorena dressed in one of her suits, chocolate-brown pants and a pink blouse embroidered with cherry blossoms. She tugged at the shirt's hems to test if it was still holding up in old age. Matt had bought it three years ago when Christmas gifts were more than take-out gift certificates for late nights in their respective offices.

After dressing, Lorena walked downstairs. Each morning, she scanned the paper while he grabbed his keys and briefcase, the last arcs of their solitary movements before they left for the college and the office. She had only recently realized that she and Matt did not seek each other out anymore, going about the house in circles. Their avoidance reminded her of a stuffed bear

she used to have when she was little. The bear had a hard, domed nose. Under the plastic, two cars barely a centimeter long sat on opposite sides of a racetrack. When she squeezed its stomach, the cars would race around in the bear's nose, red then blue then red again, the cars never able to catch up to each other, always held at the same distance no matter how fast or how hard she squeezed the bear.

When she finally heard Matt's car leave, Lorena fixed herself breakfast, toast with a spoonful of whatever jam was left in the fridge, and ate only one bite. The coffee-maker buzzed, and Lorena closed her eyes. Her mother was dying, and all she could think about were her lesson plans. Maggie relayed the doctor's words that Rosamond had only a few days left, was wasting away so quickly that the changes could be seen from one hour to the next. Lorena had only visited her mother twice since the stroke left Rosamond in a coma.

To escape the repetitiveness of the lecture hall, Lorena planned for her class to gather at the local history museum. She exploited downtown's history as often as possible to cut back on the work that she bored students with. Blocks of lessons were preserved in St. Clair by historical societies and national grants. American history could be mapped on these streets in brick, columns, Charleston, Federal, neoclassical, single house and double house.

Lorena walked from the parking garage through the center of campus and out the other side, east to the museum. Once or twice she stumbled on the uneven cobblestone. She no longer scanned the crowd to see if anyone had caught her slip as she used to when she was a student. Lorena had overcome her worries of humiliation—or at least learned that no one was immune to gravity. The cobblestone gave way to concrete as the palmetto and oak gave way to modern downtown buildings. The museum was a big, rectangular hunk of bricks cemented together, no thought given to form.

Lorena was alone when she entered the museum, early enough to avoid the grade school field trips, in the weekday hush after the vacationers packed up their beach gear and headed either direction on US-17 away from the beaches on St. Clair's outskirts. Since the first group would not arrive for another fifteen minutes, Lorena walked the first floor. The new exhibit featured six-foot gates mounted to the walls. In their own way, they were beautiful, and she admired the time required for their crafting, evidenced by the mirror images of iron curls fringing the ends of the bars. All of the gates were heated and beaten into shape by living artists the same way their parents and grandparents and ancestors beyond memory had stored this bit of beautiful sacred knowledge in their hands.

Below the gates, display cases featured nineteenth-century jewelry and other personal affects. Coral, garnet, and gold combs and rings etched with jessamine and wrens. Lorena read the information cards and took a few notes to share with her students. The last jewelry sets were examples of hair jewelry. Lorena imagined the smell of them when they were freshly made, the wax cement, the curiously clean smell of hair boiled in soda water, the coppery tubes used as frames to braid the hair around.

"If you looked any harder at that case, I'd have my guards keep an eye on you." The museum curator, a woman Lorena had met at a few St. Clair Historical Society meetings, came out of a door marked "Museum Staff Only." They laughed and shook hands and both stared at the hand-made crafts beneath the glass.

"My mother used to make hair jewelry. She would get commissions and sell some on display at reenactments. She liked acorn earrings the best. I guess because they reminded her of playing outside under the oaks as a girl."

"That explains your interest in history."

Lorena shrugged. She circled the case and looked at the entryway to check on her students. “I thought I was rebelling by keeping it confined to books.”

“Let me know if your mother would like to display her work here.” The curator left the exhibit. She smiled, waved to the guards and volunteers selling tickets, and climbed the staircase to the permanent exhibits.

Lorena could not bring herself to tell the truth, that her mother was ill. Even if she were not, Lorena wouldn’t have been able to pick up the phone out of old spite. All of the phone conversations she and Rosamond ever had after her high school graduation could be counted on her fingers.

She wanted to touch the brooch in the case, to open it up and brush the feathery hairs glued into place. Instead, she greeted the first of her students.

#

Her mother could have told Lorena a million things about the passage of life that would have made adolescence easier to bear. Instead, her mother left her to tend to herself. When Lorena asked a boy to the fifth-grade sock hop and was rejected, Rosamond offered no consoling words, no mysterious wisdom of fish and the wide sea for her young mind to mull over at night. Lorena learned how to ride a bike from her teachers, how to teach herself from textbooks when her mother didn’t help her with homework, how to dodge bullies and hide her scrapes before she sat down to dinner.

Eventually, Lorena stopped asking for advice or anything requiring a delicate, thoughtful response. One winter afternoon, she discovered a streak of red lining her underwear. Her face and hands grew cold as she worried that everyone had seen the blood, had laughed behind her back, and now discussed how to humiliate her further while she was not in the classroom. She

went over the steps to the nurse and to the classroom until she had memorized her motions and could count on her face to remain as emotionless as the concrete-block walls of the school.

She walked to the nurse's office and asked the old woman seated behind the desk for a pad, just as she'd seen in a health class video.

The nurse opened a blue, sterile-looking drawer of the cabinet against the wall and rummaged through boxes. "Heavy flow, liner, wings, no wings?"

"Normal, I guess."

The nurse placed a thick pink wrapper on the desk. "First time?"

"No." Lorena signed out and ran down the hallway back to the bathroom.

In the safety of the dark stall, she took the pad from its wrapper and stared at it. She figured out how to peel off the paper strip and to align the bulky pad between her thin thighs. She felt vulnerable, that her lack of knowledge about such mysteries would be written on her forehead, that, walking back into the classroom, each student would see the new bulge in the seat of her pants and know her female shame.

Yet, she returned in the middle of a lecture on *Tom Sawyer*, and the students remained quiet. Their stares bored through her side and her cheek, but that was all. Lorena set her pass on the desk along with the nurse's note.

As she walked to her desk, she stepped with the shortest stride possible. She could not let them hear the crinkle of the pad, could not let them have one more weapon against her.

"Trip again and cut your knee? Need someone to kiss it and make it better, baby?" One of the boys taunted while the teacher had her back turned.

Lorena sunk in her chair and smiled, even for the ache in her stomach.

When the final bell rang, she ran to the buses and took her seat behind the driver. Though she usually walked off the bus and squared her shoulders down the dirt driveway to pretend she wasn't afraid, today she ran to her brick one-story house surrounded by pine trees. She pulled her key out and unlocked the door. She took a pad from beneath her mother's sink, hoping Rosamond would not notice that one was gone. When they went grocery shopping that night, Lorena excused herself, bought her own box with her allowance, and waited in the car.

When they got home, her mother didn't ask about the bag. She put away the groceries and sat down to create a pin. She had a large magnifying glass that hovered on a wire frame above the pin. Placing a few hairs at a time, it took hours for her mother to create one of the three peonies that a grandmother had commissioned. Lorena watched from the doorway, unable to focus on her schoolwork.

"Did you know that hair is one of the greatest symbols of womanhood?" her mother would always ask when Lorena interrupted her hobby.

There was nothing natural, Lorena thought, about her hair or her body.

#

Lorena removed a second suitcase from the closet—not that she packed so much as she didn't know how to prepare herself for her final trip home. At least this case wouldn't be entirely full. When she'd checked all the necessities off her list, she lined up the luggage. She sat on the edge of the bed, hands wrapped around a post, fingers running up and down its carved spiral body.

"Can I help you carry them out to the car?"

Matt stepped into the room. She hadn't heard him enter the house.

"Thank you," she said. She grabbed the smaller suitcase and followed him outside.

He said, “It’ll be a nice week. Bet you won’t need a jacket.”

“I packed three just in case.” She leaned against the car. Her keys, tucked in her pocket, poked her hip.

Matt drummed on the hood. “How much will you bring back? Call me if you need a moving van.”

Five years, and they still spoke to each other as if they were shy. Lorena pulled him to her and kissed him like the times in college she would fall behind their friends, drag him behind a building pillar, and let go of her self-awareness with him.

“You should get going,” he said, “if you want to make visiting hours on time.” He kept his hands on her shoulders.

She needed this—they both did—for Kershaw to stop eclipsing her life in St. Clair.

#

Lorena drove the speed limit north and west, deeper into South Carolina toward the Sandhills. The little stretch of state running diagonally south-west to north-east marked the old coastline where the oceans used to hit before tectonics added the Low Country to the state. Maggie said her mother’s condition was declining steadily, that there was no need to rush the arrangements, sorting out the will and cleaning the old house.

Her mother first had been rushed to the ICU of the county hospital after her stroke, but they moved her to a permanent room when she did not wake from her coma. Lorena hadn’t seen the inside of the hospital but a few times for sporadic checkups, days when she needed to drive to the capital for work or passed through on her way to conferences.

Farther from the coastline, the roads started to dip and rise in hills of growing height. Bends followed large fields of cattle and rows of plants that Lorena could guess at—corn,

tobacco, tomatoes. Forest gave way to open ground only to be swallowed by dark pine trees once more. Even in summer, when the sun descended well after nine o'clock, the trees blocked the light, made the landscape gray-brown. All the tall trunks looked the same and it was easy to get lost in the woods without a strong sense of direction. Changes along the drive made Lorena confused, missing buildings, missing trees and signs creating small black holes in her heart that tugged at her sensibility to keep things the way they were.

Lorena drove in and out of small towns, some only as large as four buildings, one on each corner of the crossroads. After two hours, the trees gave way to trailer lots, then old homes, then an empty space surrounding the county hospital. It was not very big, only a couple stories and two outlying buildings. The emergency parking and the visitors' parking was only differentiated by little blue signs with white "E"s spray-painted on them. Lorena parked her car in the space farthest from the door, delaying her entrance, delaying the inevitable bleach hospital smell and frequent intercom pages. Maggie had given her directions: walk to the back of the main hallway, take the elevators on the left to the top floor. Hook around to the black telephone on the wall and ask for Rosamond's room. She counted instructions off in her head.

Everything seemed made of stainless steel or painted a clinical green-blue. The telephone sat on the wall, just as Maggie said, next to a sign indicating visiting hours and numbers to dial. Lorena looked at her wristwatch and realized she was twenty minutes too late. She fretted, walked into the waiting lounge and watched headlines zip by on CNN for a few minutes. As she looked back and forth between the television and her watch, Lorena figured that Maggie would not be waiting for her, that she had probably left hours ago. Lorena walked to the phone and picked up the receiver.

After a menu of options, a light, feminine voice came over the line. Lorena repeated her mother's last name and room number. "I'm sorry I'm late, but I just drove two hours. I forgot the right times."

"You must be her daughter," the nurse said. "Margaret told us to expect you."

The double doors next to the telephone opened. Lorena pushed, first one foot, then the other, until she was in the next room. A nurse sat behind a wide desk, eyes remaining on the screen in front of her, three empty chairs to her left. Her scrubs were covered by multi-colored rabbits chasing carrots. She pointed and said 302.

Two doors on the right was her mother's room. The overhead lights were off, but a dim yellow lamp beside the bulky equipment lit her mother's bed. A hulking stand of monitors and screens eight-feet tall towered above Rosamond.

Lorena circled the room. She smelled the roses Maggie no doubt had left. The window overlooked the parking lot and the forest in the direction of town. In the direction of home. Then Lorena sat in the chair next to the bed. Her mother's white hospital gown pulled unevenly to the side, covering one collarbone and revealing the other. The sheets rumped and touched the floor to the right. The nurse must not have taken care to make the bed well enough. Surely Rosamond couldn't move the bedding.

After she adjusted the sheets, Lorena held her mother's hand. It was cold and wrinkled, too old a hand to belong to her mother, but here it was, attached to the wrist, which attached to the arm, on up the body to a face that was unmistakable even for all its changes. Rosamond had aged so rapidly.

Holding hands—that was something one did at the bedside of a hospitalized loved one. Lorena couldn't get used to the feeling of the limp fingers laced with her own, fingers whose grip

used to be so strong it would crush child-Lorena's hand as they walked together to the elementary school, hands so deft that they could take sixteen strands of hair and create a perfect square chain. Rosamond had spent hours each day twining strands of hair together for loved ones who must have waited in hospitals, waiting for any sign whether good or bad.

The monitors buzzed faintly. They kept time with Rosamond's heartbeats, her slow, inaudible breaths.

"Sorry, there was a tractor outside Manning. He held up traffic for at least ten minutes. Has anyone told you about the Wal-Mart they're putting up outside of town? Cleared away the old Roberts farm. Can't believe they need another one already."

Rosamond didn't move. Lorena talked to the rhythm of the constant beeping. She talked about Matt and her dissertation and all of the problems she never knew adults had to face. She talked until her voice cracked and she filled a paper cup from a stack near the sink with water and drank it. She pulled a Kleenex from a box Maggie must have left and cleared her nose. She moved her throat and her tongue and her lips until she felt as if she'd told the story of her self, until she was tired throughout her body, well beyond the hours she was supposed to be in the hospital.

When she had nothing new to tell her mother, Lorena stepped outside the hospital. Away from the street lamps, Lorena could make out more stars than she could in St. Clair's constant glow of houses and shop fronts. Lorena tried to make out the North Star that Rosamond had always spoken so much about, but she could not be sure which of the bright stars it was, or if it only came out during certain times of the year. The chilled air made her long to be indoors again, but she waited for her cheeks to dry.

There were so many things to know in one lifetime and no way of learning them all. With no possibility of Rosamond waking up in time, Lorena would have to make up all of the answers about herself from now on. She whistled a few of the Civil War battle songs that were her mother's favorites from the reenactments. She waited until she couldn't feel her fingertips before heading inside.

CHARLESTON MUD HENS

Sadie hopped on her bicycle and headed west toward the St. Clair shopping district. Thick crowds downtown blocked her advance, and she toed the bike forward an inch at a time. Barb, her boss, had asked her to come in on her day off to the bakery where she managed the morning shift. *Busload tourists wiped out shelves*, Barb's text message had said. Sadie cursed the ever-increasing masses of tourists. The bakery had wiped out dough reserves in the freezer and sheeted pastries ready in the refrigerator for the display case, enough to feed two usual days' worth of customers.

As the weather transitioned from freezing to blazing, South Carolinians took advantage of the only pleasant spring month of the year. Spring always meant groups celebrating elementary- and middle-school graduations. Other crowds came from all over, and of course nothing captured a trip to St. Clair like coffee and food from Barbara's Bakery. The busloads bought enough food to pay for salaries and supplies for the rest of the summer, yet gave Sadie nothing but headaches.

A crowd of students and chaperones hooked out the front door and down the sidewalk. Sadie turned down the alleyway adjacent to the bakery, leaned her bike against the crumbling brick wall, and kicked the door for someone to open up—her hands too busy between a cigarette and a bike lock.

The afternoon shift baker opened the door. Sadie flicked the cigarette butt into the pile she kept out back and cleaned up once a week, when she managed to remember.

“What the hell is going on with the town today?” Sadie felt for the crumpled pack of cigarettes that she had stuffed in her pocket, but figured she did not have time for another smoke without the threat of Hurricane Barb coming down on her.

“The whole of Richland County let loose on St. Clair,” the cook said

“Don’t they have their own old shit?” she said. “Save the gas money and visit the State House.” Somehow, relics two and a half hours away were more appealing than those back home.

The cook smiled and pulled the back door closed. “Am I letting you take over?”

“Got to see the boss first.”

Barb’s office was tucked in the back corner of the half of the shop privy to customers. The office wasn’t large—nothing in the downtown district was. The colonists who established St. Clair before the Revolution had had less stuff to clog up their townhomes with, and constructed to a scale one fraction smaller than modern structures. Buildings fit like sweaters shrunk in the dryer just enough that it was not clear if they could stretch out again, but were not small enough to toss. Barb hung newspaper and magazine clippings on her walls in a collage of mismatched frames and sizes.

Sadie sat across from Barb and slouched in her chair.

Barb lifted one finger and finished typing up an order. She was average height, but her impeccable posture made her appear taller than she actually was. Barb’s ash blonde hair spiked upward from her head. She was doughy, and creases around her eyes told her age better than her upbeat voice did. She had her bitchy moments, arguing over supplies and the proximity of cigarette smoke to the front door, yet she provided love and stability Sadie never had growing up. Barb made her cut out all of the nonsense of her vagrant, late teenage years. Week-long trips away from St. Clair were out, too. Bread couldn’t be proofed on an irregular schedule.

“I need you to switch your morning shifts next week. Tuesday for Wednesday. We’ll need you to make the extras on Monday instead.”

“Who’s coming to visit?” Sadie’s schedule got changed for few reasons; minor foreign dignitaries and the Governor’s wife were at the top of the list.

“*Southern Hospitality* is doing a feature article. We get ten pages for recipes and pictures and interviews.”

Sadie never read magazines, but even she had heard of *Southern Hospitality*. Though she would never admit to it, she got her idea for the tart cherry pie out of the magazine. “So stay in the back and don’t talk to anyone. Got it.”

Barb walked around to the front of her desk and leaned against it. She folded her hands in front of her. “The title of the magazine is *Southern*. That puts a restriction on what we can highlight.”

“I’ve been here eight years, Barb. St. Clair is the only place I’ve ever called home. I’m more local than all the chain stores they let invade downtown.”

“Can’t help it.”

“Basically you’re objecting to me because I’m a Yankee? That’s ridiculous. And...regionalist. I should inform the ACLU.” Sadie slammed her hands on the arms of the chair. It was mainly her appearance that excluded her from newspaper photos and interviews before—her attitude too, but she could get along with people if she wanted, or if she were paid generously.

“I know the excuse is ridiculous, but I do have to ask. We haven’t been in an issue since before you got here, the second year the bakery was open. That was thirteen years ago. I was

starting to think I'd offended Matilda Shaw. I just don't want you running off at the mouth at her or our customers."

Sadie rested her elbows on her knees. She had never complained before about being left out for interviews that no one besides St. Clair citizens cared about. She did not like being photographed anyway. Yet this time it bugged her. Barb's was successful before she came along, but there was no way they'd have gotten by without her Lady Baltimore cakes and the tons of other recipes she'd revived, aided only by a stand-mixer and a preset oven.

"I'll throw in an extra morning off. After Memorial Day." Sadie tapped her foot. Barb was not trying hard enough. "All right. Come if you want, but I can't save your job if they give us bad press."

"Thanks," Sadie said through gritted teeth. "I'll be in my corner if you need me."

Barb squeezed her shoulder and let her escape to the mess in the kitchen. Sadie banged pots and pans together as she rummaged around cabinets, trying to remember where they were in the menu rotation.

The bakery was its own miniature world at that moment, bustling and chaotic and covered by a fine film of flour and grease. Bowls and baking sheets filled two industrial-sized sinks. Cooks and sales staff ran in and out of the kitchen to deliver trays of goods or return empty ones. Sadie gathered ingredients around her for bear claws and Danishes and more exotic candied flower petals and colored icings more like toys than food. Experimenting took her mind away from worries. The hum of regulars and tourists created a background pulse to work in time to. The attraction to Barb's was a like that of a cult, which explained the world in a way to Sadie that made sense. Baking was a good metaphor for the world outside the kitchen—you win some, you lose some, but all results were generally edible.

Barb stuck her head through the doorway that separated the dining area from the kitchen. “Hey, Sugar, we ran out of biscuits and chocolate turnovers.”

Sadie caught a glimpse only of the back of Barb’s head before she disappeared again. Barb was the only one allowed to call her Sugar, probably on account of the hundreds of empty calories she consumed testing new recipes each week. Restocking the display case and the frozen dough took up the rest of Sadie’s attention. None of the physical copies of her recipes were kept at the bakery because batter spray kept making them illegible. She’d copied out recipe after recipe, but they’d all disintegrated within weeks so now she calculated and rotated multiple projects in her head. Barb joked it made her a little cross-eyed at times.

By the time Sadie took the last tray of desserts out to the dining room, her arms were exhausted from scraping bowls and shaping loaves. The tray was almost too much to carry. The dining room contained a few tables for regulars and tourists to have lunch or afternoon tea. The space was always filled by a noise that made the kitchen blenders sound like calm ocean waves. She did not know how the other staff managed to stay sane having to deal with customer disorder on a daily basis. At least the tourists had left for the day, back to the other regions of the state.

Barb finished ringing up a coffee for a regular and slid the glass door on the back of the display case aside for Sadie. “Charleston Mud Hens, again? That’s Tuesdays.”

“Customers will just have to deal. If they don’t like it, tough shit.” The layered bars with a flaky, brown sugar top were one of Sadie’s favorites to make—and they had run out of chocolate for turnovers.

“Sadie!” Barb threw a dishtowel at her and leveled a glare at Sadie.

Sadie shrugged, but the look nagged the back of her mind. As she dusted some flour from her arms, she realized that she had not covered up her tattoos. Two of Barb’s rules if Sadie was

going to be in the dining room were No Cussing and No Visible Tattoos. Customers got too antsy when Sadie followed neither. Her right palm hovered over the oak tree on her left forearm, but did not entirely hide it. Usually, she touched the oak when she craved something she was not supposed to have on Barb's watch such as her cigarettes, or when customers went crazy about coming in too late after all the turnovers had been sold.

"I guess it's all right," Barb said. "The only people in here are used to you." She drew Sadie under her arm and they rested that way for a moment, Sadie's head leaned against Barb's shoulder, neither worried about the smudges of cinnamon Sadie left on her boss's shirt. Barb smelled of lemon and of ink from the registers. Sadie wiped at crusted dough on her knuckles and wrist bones.

"I'll be in tomorrow bright and early," Sadie said as she ducked out from under Barb's arm.

"See you."

A customer walked up and Barb pressed buttons as she called out her order.

"You know, you owe me," Sadie said. "Today doesn't make this even." She smirked. Most of the time, she could get what she wanted if she brought it up behind the counter where there were witnesses.

Barb waved her off. Another rule. No Arguing in Front of the Customers. Sadie exited to the alley and stood smoking and nudging the weeds that grew between the cobblestones. Then she climbed on her bike and peddled, ignoring the strain on her exhausted calf muscles and lower back.

#

On her days off, Sadie liked to unwind by sitting in the park that ran along much of St. Clair's waterfront. The ocean breeze felt worlds away from the heat of five-hundred-degree ovens and red-hot stoves. The city had no real beach, just a fence and a stone wall that kept the ocean off St. Clair's streets. At low tide, the water uncovered marsh and sandpipers poked their long beaks into the mud for food invisible from the benches. Dolphins played in the surf cast in the wake of sailboats and towering cargo ships. Sadie sat under the two-story-tall trees and watched tourists ride by on carriages.

Sadie had never been on a tour, but she imagined they smelled. The horses wore bags attached to their rear ends so that they would not pollute the cobblestone streets. No one cared about the asphalt roads, but the cobblestone was sacred to the character of historic St. Clair. For the most part, Sadie avoided everywhere downtown except Barb's, though living only two miles away could barely be thought of as avoiding downtown.

A boy wrapped his arm around a girl in the back of one of the carriages. Their chaperone stared in the opposite direction at the skyline of steeples. The tour guide recited from his speech and the tourists laughed. How did they not notice the horses' smell? What would it be like not to see the museums and the carriages and the courthouse and all of the metal plaques with a jaded eye?

When she was seventeen, Sadie left her negligent parents and bounced up and down the east coast. She stayed with friends, made new ones of other people in these houses, beach bums and kids too high to be any use for real jobs. Baltimore one night, St. Augustine the next. Her destination was governed by drivers willing to let her tag along. In many of these places, she collected tattoos. The oak and the rose were her favorites, but she had different types of plants and symbols all over her body. One large artwork of a water nymph and the sea spanned her left

side from her navel up around her shoulder blade to the top of her arm. The playing dolphins gave her the compulsion to touch that tattoo, her fingers following the swish of the nymph's body through her t-shirt. She kept getting more tattoos so she could feel the raised lines where the needles pushed ink into her skin, her fingertips remembering the tactile images.

Sadie stood up and walked the pathways of broken shell. The routes converged then moved outward again between trees and statues. Sadie looped figure-eights and walked and walked. Someone asked if she was lost, but she only shook her head and kept moving.

Sadie had met Barb by chance. One of the girls she had been staying with was second cousins with Barb or something removed—the complex kinship relations made Sadie's head spin. The day had been the girl's birthday and, since no one else knew how to cook beyond operating a few select buttons on the microwave, Sadie cooked a three-course meal complete with the chocolate cake recipe from a grandmother she had only met twice. The rest of the story was incidental bliss. Barb had rescued her from aimlessness by offering her a job and space on her couch until Sadie had saved enough money for her own apartment.

When a shell poked inside her shoe, Sadie sat in the grass. She removed the shell and leaned back. The scent of the brackish water was soaked into her hair and her skin.

Twenty-five was not an old age, but Sadie felt old on days when the sky was overcast or when she encountered nesting pairs of birds. The small details of change in nature reminded her that she was not the same person she was as a teenager or was as a child, nor would she be the same when she got to be Barb's age, old enough to be a mother to a grown-up Sadie herself. She could not relate to the kids on the tour nor the high school girls who twittered in the bakery between sales. At work functions, she more often than not found herself laughing at the stories of

people twice her age, their wisdom more appealing than the passion of her days of drugs and travel.

Sadie threw the shell, then gathered more in her palms to toss at a nearby tree. The majority missed. One of the bigger shells split in two.

#

Sadie woke up at four to be at the bakery by five—mornings started early when customers wanted their coffee and pastries before work. She held up a new dress before the mirror. The skirt flared out from her waist with hidden pockets full of recipe cards scribbled the night before, in case Matilda Shaw cared about molasses cake. Picking a dress and a sweater and shoes had taken an hour when she usually threw on jeans and a t-shirt in thirty seconds. She even packed in her book bag the red-and-cream-checkered apron Barb had bought her one Christmas. She had never used it before. The afternoon cook picked her up in his old Ford so she would not ruin her outfit on the bike.

Guests packed the dining room wall to wall by eight. Word had inevitably gotten around St. Clair, probably from the talkative sales staff. Some of the regulars took off work for the morning and purchased coffee after coffee and cinnamon roll after beignet after apple turnover to keep their tables in hopes they would be one of the three customer profiles featured in the magazine.

Sadie came out from the back in between projects to survey the crowd. Some regulars patted her on the back or her shoulders, careful not to shake her hand and get flour on themselves too. Usually Sadie felt like the Peanuts character Pigpen, but had toned down throwing flour and spilling milk on herself. All of the employees were at work—an unnecessary amount of people, probably a violation of a few St. Clair fire and social codes. Many of the high school and college

students worked shifts in between classes or on weekends, so the dining room staff outnumbered the kitchen staff by at least four to one, probably more, but Sadie tried to save her mental calculations for multiplying the recipe for sugar cookies. Sadie hated the cramped feeling, someone looking over her shoulder as she cooked. She yelled orders at the part-time kids—how to properly clean all of the ranges and how to put the finishing touches on the pastries.

By ten, the noise had gone from a murmur to a din louder than all of the appliances turned on at once. Sadie reminded staff to keep working instead of twiddling their fingers and touching up their appearances in the dull reflection of the refrigerators. There were bets as to which dish Matilda would like best or whether Barb or Matilda would win a fist fight or a bake-off, right on down to whose hair was bigger. Customers brushed their faces with napkins and pulled out combs in order to be camera-ready. Sadie realized from the palpable anxiety that the interview was important for everyone she knew in St. Clair, not just Barb.

A moment later, Barb led the way for a small contingency of photographers and journalists. Through the crowd, Sadie could make out a woman at the center of her own storm. Her thick black hair streaked with gray was pushed high up in a bun on crown of her head. She wore jeans and a black blouse as if she could fool anyone into believing she was a casual country woman, not one of the biggest business women in the country running a magazine and television shows and cookbook publications. Customers brought old issues of *Southern Hospitality* or cookbooks to be signed by Matilda Shaw. Sadie cringed as Matilda screeched a *Hey y'all* as loud and long as she could stretch the vowels and still render them into sensible English. Maybe the hair was fake, but surely the accent was exaggerated.

The interviews began after Barb gave Matilda the short tour and described each of the photos hung in the dining room. The kitchen staff volunteered to go after the dining room staff,

who were all smiles and “Yes, ma’am” and “No, ma’am.” They were the types featured in photos of the South Carolina Low Country, the pearls and the white smiles and the navy ties with white palmetto trees. The kitchen crew cleaned up nicely, but they were no beauties compared to the polished customer-service-oriented sales kids. Sadie brushed her dress of imaginary flour and blushed when the blondes up front complimented her on it.

The roiling in Sadie’s stomach made her shake. She allowed everyone else to go first, hoping to calm herself before her interview. She made easy dishes, such as the chicken salad and the pimento cheese that she usually left for the others because the recipes were tough to screw up.

Finally, after the lunch hour had come and gone, Barb called her name through the doorway. Sadie brushed her hands, removed the apron, and went to the corner table where Matilda conducted the interviews, allowing the customers and the fans passing by the window to gawk. Matilda asked the typical how-long-had-she-worked-there questions. Sadie could not help staring at the golden brooch with alternating purple, blue, and green beads attached to her shirt like an ostentatious Christmas ornament on an otherwise bare tree.

“So, where are you from?” Matilda asked from her list of questions. She tapped her fingers and looked around the room, never concentrating on Sadie.

“New York, Michigan, all over really. My step-dad didn’t like to settle down for too long.”

“How nice of Barb to accommodate the out-of-towners. Now you work in the kitchen. Do you do prep work?”

“No, I’m the head baker.”

“Really?” Matilda reached across the table and took Sadie’s hand in hers. “I’ve been dying to know where you get your recipes.”

“Most of them come from the library.” Sadie pulled her hand and shook it. It was covered with imprints of Matilda’s rings.

Matilda leaned back in her chair and put her hands on her hips. “That is one of the more original answers I’ve heard. No grandmother? No mother? And no New York style cheesecake?” She chuckled at her own awful joke.

“I like to do things without help. Barbara gives me free reign in the kitchen to design dishes as I please.”

In the background, Barb handed out to-go bags of food to the remaining regulars to persuade them to leave before closing time. The interviews and rush of customers made the day go by fast, but there was still an hour left until close. Sadie pulled at the seam of her sweater. She looked up. Matilda stared at her. The air of celebrity was gone, replaced by a colder, more critical look.

“Barb’s was a different place when we first visited. It had none of the atmosphere it does now. How would you say you’ve contributed to making this bakery one of the most successful in the Southeast?”

Sadie shrugged. “I’d say it’s the cup of bourbon in the chocolate cake.”

Matilda pursed her lips and scribbled something much shorter than Sadie’s response.

“What is a typical day at—”

“Can I ask you something?”

Matilda nodded.

Sadie felt the anger rising in her throat, the sort that relegated her to the kitchen and which had gotten more than one biscuit thrown in her face from appalled, enraged customers. She tried to think of the most venomous question in her repertoire.

Barb shut the register drawer loudly. On accident, the display of business cards fell over the side of the counter. As the girls picked up the scattered pieces of paper, Sadie noticed Barb's stiffened lips and arms drawn behind her back. Barb would be twining her fingers, the embarrassment obvious on her face. It was Barb's big day after all.

And Sadie was going to ruin it.

Matilda cleared her throat. "Did you have a question, dear?"

"How do you get to work in the test kitchens of *Southern Hospitality*? I have always wondered how you go about selecting the cooks. How do you know they won't burn everything they try to make?" Sadie let out a sigh. Her stupid questions were the best she could do on the spot, but they seemed harmless enough.

"Why, are you interested?" Matilda laughed. "I think Barb would hate to lose her star."

Sadie pulled up the corners of her mouth in a failed smile. "Just curious."

Matilda rambled off an answer Sadie did not hear. She was too busy biting her tongue.

"Where'd you grow up? Your accent is quite pronounced."

"Honey, have you seen Paula Deen lately? You try keeping sales up if you don't act like her. Now, in exchange, give me your recipe for the Lady Baltimore Cake. The Mud Hens, too."

Sadie pulled the cards out of her pocket and slid them across the table. She headed back into the kitchen. The water out of the spigot would not get cold enough, so Sadie opened the freezer and stood in front of it.

The burning feeling in her stomach didn't go away. Sadie left. The half a dozen kids standing around could finish closing duties.

The day had cooled down and the dark clouds massing on the horizon threatened an afternoon shower. Sadie sat a while in the tourist district, watching people buy cheap purses and saltwater taffy. They were content with their junk replicas, kids with their toys that would fly apart in the car ride home, t-shirts with iron-on prints that would never come back out of dressers.

When thunder sounded, Sadie walked home. She returned to her apartment just as the rain started pouring. Barb sat on her front porch, hands in her lap.

"Take a seat." Barb patted the rocking chair next to hers, one of the broken ones Sadie had found next to a dumpster one day.

"You know," Barb said, "My grandma used to make the best Sunday pot roast in the county. People would ask for it at church potlucks and weddings. Funerals, even. But I was always too nervous to learn how to make it. That knowing how would make it taste less special, and I would never be able to cook it as well anyway. She passed real sudden and I never got the recipe."

"Sorry."

"Ain't your fault." For a while, Barb looked out into the rain. The tree branches swayed in the strong wind. Tufts of Spanish moss and twigs blew across the sidewalk. Sadie took off her sweater. She reached toward the rose on her right arm, tracing the black outlines of petals. Only lately had she noticed that this was the tattoo she reached for when she thought about Barb.

“I always thought you’d be gone after a year or two. Then it turned to five years, then eight. I kept putting off opening another location because I thought you’d leave as soon as I asked.”

“Well, it seems Matilda Shaw thinks I’m only good for my recipes.”

Barb picked up Sadie’s hand. Unlike Matilda’s vice grip, Barb’s was gentle. She rubbed her thumb across Sadie’s, as light as a gust of wind from a ceiling fan. “You know you’re a daughter to me. Sometimes business gets in the way, but don’t forget that I love you all the same. Now, about opening that store.”

“You want to?”

“Might as well.”

Sadie rocked in the chair for some time. The new kitchen would need more surface area. Large tables in the middle of the room and a walk-in refrigerator and wallpaper in the dining area that would not remind people of their grandparents’ houses.

“Would you like some tea?” When Barb said yes, Sadie got up and poured two glasses from the pitcher she kept filled in the fridge. She squeezed some lemon into Barb’s, but none into hers. She had never adapted to the Southern taste for lemon in everything.

They rocked on the porch, ignoring the humidity and the buzzing insects. April was still bearable, especially with rain to cut through the afternoon heat. Miles inland, they could not hear the tide or the slapping of palmetto fronds, but frogs croaking in nearby streams. In a month, they would be driven inside for the summer, but, for now, they could sit and listen.

BRAIDS

Eve parked in the numbered spot assigned to her at orientation. The new-car formaldehyde odor still gave her a headache. The vehicles on either side of the parking space were trucks that blocked hers from sight. Eve twirled the keychain once on her finger then put it in her book bag next to her calculator and mechanical pencils. She hurried into the school. A few kids called her name—caught in a back-to-school high of friendliness that would wear off within a week—and she waved back at them, though she didn't stop to talk. Most everyone at West St. Clair had grown up together, their moms and dads carpooling to the city or nearby factories together, which made it impossible for Eve to be invisible. She knew just about everyone, and just about everyone knew her—an ordinary role in their everyday lives, and she would not ruin it by calling attention to herself with silly things like auditioning for the cheerleading squad or joining academic decathlon or showing up on the first day of her junior year with a new car.

She organized her locker by class period, taped her color-coded schedule to the inside of the door, and withdrew textbooks for the first half of her day, English, History, and Pre-Calculus, all honors. English and History sped along in a flurry of background information and note-taking, but Eve stopped in the doorway when she walked into pre-cal. A girl, her hair pulled into a ponytail high on the crown of her head, wearing a Smashing Pumpkins t-shirt two sizes too large, sat on the far side of the classroom. Eve gripped the straps of her book bag and walked toward her.

“Hey, Kayla, mind if I sit by you?”

The girl looked up from her textbook. She was in Eve's grade. Their birthdays were a month apart. They had been best friends until sixth grade. At sleepovers, they would jump on

Eve's bed while holding hands, would talk until they heard Eve's father downstairs turn on the shower to get ready for work. Though they still went on the same field trips, ate in the same cafeteria, and were bored by the same assemblies, a distance had grown between them that Eve always wondered about when Kayla passed her in the hallways.

"Your hair sure has gotten darker."

"I know. Half the school thinks I dyed it. I didn't."

Eve nodded. She set her desk to rights: pen, pencil, and eraser balanced at the top, matching forest-green folder and notebook squared with the corners of the desk.

"So, how's your mom?"

Kayla flipped her pencil in her fingers as if she were a drummer impressing fans onstage. "Still at the hospital. They gave her a midday shift, so we see each other more."

Eve said, "We should—"

The bell rang for instruction to begin, and Eve swiveled toward the teacher standing at the head of the classroom.

#

Eve pushed the greens around her plate. Her parents had a rule that no one could get up from the table before everyone else finished. Eve stared at her father night after night as he spooned second helpings, sprinkled on them half the contents of the salt and pepper shakers, and shoveled mouthful after mouthful into the hole in his face. Did everyone look this unattractive eating? There was no telling what her mother still saw in him. But he sat up straight and smiled for holiday photos, which must have counted for something.

Eve's mother was the opposite of her husband. She was still beautiful in her own way, tall, relatively unwrinkled. The strand of pearls he gave her as a present when Eve was born was still around her neck, even when she wore jeans and a t-shirt to make dinner.

"How's school? Make any new friends your first week?"

"Mom, they're all the same people. You know the new kids never show up until halfway through the year. Can I be excused?"

Her mother and father exchanged glances. He shrugged, but said nothing as he chewed another bite.

"Well, when do you sign up for your big tests? College applications are coming up."

Eve liked that subject less than the one about new friends. "Kayla's in math with me. I was thinking we could start hanging out again."

There was a crack in one of the table's cream-colored tiles that Eve had never noticed before. The sealant between the tiles was dirty in places and would need refinished, though that would make the kitchen smell weird again for a week. The rest of the kitchen was white cabinets and a white refrigerator. The room would be more inviting if Eve attacked it Jackson Pollock style. Even the plant in the hanging basket in the corner grew pale green, as if it couldn't be convinced to put much effort into living.

Her mother rubbed her temple with her right hand. "Dale, how do you feel about Kayla? I was sort of happy to see you find other friends."

If her father agreed, Eve couldn't tell. He looked down at his plate, trying to keep out of it. It was normal for him to defer to her mother's opinions.

"What does that mean?"

“Nothing, dear, just that you two didn’t have a lot in common. It’s hard to stay friends with someone who’s so different from you.”

“The same way you and Dad get along, right?”

“That’s completely different and you won’t understand until you’re married yourself.”

“Can I be excused?”

“Fine.”

Eve took the stairs two at a time. The muscle memory in her legs was set to *escape*, and the further she pushed each stride, the faster she could be safe in her bedroom. She fled when her parents bored her too much, when she could not stand looking at the staged photos they ordered twice a year from the professional studio at Christmas and Easter, arranged in a perfect diagonal along the stairwell, and when the floral wallpaper started to move like she read about in a story for English. All her father did was watch reality survival shows while her mother clipped recipes for spicy pork wontons and dark chocolate Baked Alaska she would never make. Each sat in his or her corner. Each had a separate lamp, a separate side table to house his or her hobby, separate pens and notepads. Eve avoided this room and her father’s constant murmurs of agreement with the announcers and the snip of her mother’s scissors. Instead, Eve studied in the library then relaxed in her bedroom.

The difference between Eve’s room and those of all the other girls’ she had slept over at was a lack of siblings. Eve never had to argue for a television or a computer, though she hardly watched anything or talked to classmates online. She never fought or wore hand-me-downs, but also had no board game nights or hours of hide and seek. Books and paints helped her ignore the quietness of her two-story, three-bedroom life. The book she pulled from the shelf was cracked

along the spine and the first chapter fell on top of her desk. She gathered the pages and read the lines she'd already memorized until she finished the book.

#

Regardless of what her mother said about Kayla, Eve sat next to her every in class. She imagined conversations they would have about the boys in gym and how the pizza was served cold again. When she'd arrive in class, Kayla would be so focused on drawing in her notebook, that Eve would say nothing. Kayla took the bus home, so there was no time after school for them to chat by their lockers or attend extracurriculars together. Eve thought and thought until one day she forced herself to do something, even if she ended up seeming ridiculous.

Eve leaned over Kayla's shoulder. She was shading a ring, the way it rounded the middle finger of her other hand. Knuckles and wrists and nails filled the page.

"Study for our portraits for sixth period," Kayla said without interrupting her sketching. "Hands are supposed to be the hardest."

"I wish I could draw so well. I wish I could do anything as well."

Kayla rubbed the drawing, her finger coming up gray and shining of graphite. "Don't you get good grades?"

"Not the same thing as being really good at something. The people who are really good at school just end up as teachers."

They both looked up from their notebooks. They laughed. Eve knew Kayla too was imagining their old middle school teacher whose lipstick-stained collars and blue eyeshadow they used to mock at recess.

"Do you want to get a soda or something later?" Eve asked. "I can give you a ride since you'll miss the bus."

“I really should get home and finish my chores before my mom gets off work,” Kayla said.

“Food doesn’t take all day.”

Kayla shrugged. “Sure.”

When the last bell rang announcing the end of the day, they met at Eve’s locker.

After driving around for half an hour, they agreed on McDonald’s and ordered at the drive-through. They split their food between them. The car idled until there was enough air conditioning shored up, and Eve turned off the engine.

“So, what’re you thinking of doing after school?” Eve asked.

“Mom thinks I’ll get a scholarship, but I don’t know. Almost think it would be nice to have a real job and not worry about money for a while.”

“Maybe.”

Kayla laughed and dipped a fry into her shake. “Don’t sound so excited. You’ll get into whatever school you want. Leave St. Clair if you want.”

“I just want to get out of my house.”

“Amen.”

Eve offered her a wad of napkins to wipe away the sticky pink film covering her fingers. The first one ripped, the pieces falling in the cup holders and on the floor. Kayla balled up the rest and stuffed them in the paper bag. Eve could not stop staring at the thick silver rings Kayla wore on most of her fingers. The rings, the frayed hems of her jeans, her unkempt hair. Eve wanted to flatten these details between two halves of a slide and study them under a microscope. Kayla was organic, asymmetric. She never had to arrange all her pens perpendicular to her notebooks.

“So, how are your parents?” Kayla asked while staring out the window. Rows of houses lined up the hill, all following a same curve, multiplied outward until the trees swallowed up the view.

“The same as usual.”

Kayla pulled the glove compartment handle and pushed it shut again. “Want to drop me off?”

Eve drove through the suburbs, the roads winding around churches and creeks. It’d been years since Eve last visited—and those times she wasn’t in the driver’s seat—and Kayla had to give directions. Often she would forget until they were yards from the next turn, forcing Eve to step hard on the brakes and once to put the car in reverse. Out here, the trees were thicker, whole uninterrupted forest for long stretches between streets. Houses sat roadside, carved out of the edge of the wilderness. Kayla pointed out a gravel road, and Eve turned right then right again onto a grass plot in front of a trailer.

Weeds grew around the walls and up the four posts of the wooden porch. The lace curtains were drawn and no lights were on. An old set of swings stood off to the side of the trailer, its two supporting triangles pointed in different directions. They had played on those swings when they were younger, the few times that Eve’s mother allowed her to stay with Kayla. They’d dared each other to swing higher and higher, until the seats lifted up out of their arcs of motion, when Eve grabbed at the chains and slowed down again, afraid of the launch skyward. Kayla always won those challenges.

A yellow lab sniffing at the edge of the porch turned to them and leaned against Kayla’s leg. Kayla patted its head. “Don’t worry, it’s just Mr. Field’s dog. You don’t remember him cause he moved in during eighth grade. He hangs out here sometimes. I give him scraps, though

now that I think about it, they're probably not good for him." She reached down under its belly and gave it two loud thumps. "Go on, say hi."

Eve touched the dog's side, Kayla's arm in between hers and the dog's mouth in case it decided it didn't like her. The fur was thick with dirt and weathering. Eve petted until she'd fulfilled the obligatory seconds of contact, and then hopped the steps toward the trailer. After another solid, thudding pat, Kayla pulled open the screen door and unlocked the dead bolt.

"Come on in. We've changed a lot, even painted my room blue." Kayla hesitated a moment before pushing the door open. The seconds hung between them like a swarm of mosquitoes in humid July air.

As Eve's eyes became accustomed to the low light, she remembered eating pot roast at the dinner table pushed against the far wall and sleeping bags stretched from couch to couch. The kitchen to her left was tidy. The tile was near white, no dishes sat in the sink, plates and cups were arranged symmetrically behind glass cabinet doors. The dining room table was covered in neat piles of newspaper and sales ads.

"Would you like something to drink?" Kayla asked, opening the fridge.

"No thanks."

Kayla grabbed a soda and walked in the living room. Eve stood in the center, unsure where to sit. Two end cushions leaned against the arms of the couch. A white pillow sat centered on the recliner, covered in a knitted version of a paper doily.

"Let's go play games on the computer," Kayla said and walked down the short hallway, disappearing into one of the rooms on the left.

Eve wanted to keep looking at the lily wallpaper and the photos that hadn't been on top the TV before, but she turned toward the one lit room. The computer desk was set up to one side. Games and bookshelves lined the other wall.

"Mom likes to call this my office." Kayla sat in one chair and offered a stool to Eve.

They put a DVD in the computer of a Judy Garland musical they'd watched until the tape broke. They hummed along to all the numbers. Eve studied the movies and CDs on the shelves. Some of the cases were from pop bands Eve listened to, but most were hip hop albums. She only knew a couple of the artists from overhearing other kids at school.

"You actually listen to this stuff?" Eve said as she picked up one of the CDs and showed it to Kayla.

Kayla shrugged with one shoulder. With the other arm, she painted her nails bright pink. "Why not? They're angry, I'm angry. I'd go into all that disenfranchised crap, but then I'd sound like we were in fourth-period Government."

"How do you find people to listen to?" Eve shuffled through the cases, studying the faces on each one, their cursive or gothic or graffiti lettering. She tried to slow down her perusing, as if she listened to this type of music all the time too.

"We listen to music on the bus. Crystal always lets me in on the really good stuff."

The screen door banged shut. They went out to the living room to say hello to Kayla's mom.

Ms. Reed leaned against the counter. She was still dressed in blue scrubs. Her blond hair was cropped the shortest Eve had ever seen it. Her tennis shoes had dark spots on them and a few light gray ones that had probably been bleached. Kayla already was taller than her mom by a head.

“Mom,” Kayla said. “You remember Eve.”

Ms. Reed turned around and wiped her hands on a dish towel. “I’m so glad you two are hanging out again. I missed you when you stopped coming round. How are you liking high school? How about the boys?” She spoke with an even, gentle tone that had soothed Eve when she’d been homesick her first night away from her parents or when she’d needed a splinter pulled from her palm after playing in the woods.

Eve shrugged.

“You two finish what you were doing. I’ll bring you snacks after I change.”

The girls retreated to the back room and pushed play on the movie. Kayla doodled in a notebook, looking up every once in a while when Eve laughed. Ms. Reed knocked on the door. She carried a tray with a stack of grilled cheese sandwiches and two sodas. Before she left, she stroked Eve’s hair, admired aloud how wavy it had gotten, then left.

“Is your mom always this nice?”

“I guess.”

“My mother wouldn’t consider this food. I like grilled cheese. But not the kind at school. It’s rock hard.”

When they finished eating, Eve shouldered her book bag. “I should probably go.”

Kayla leaned back in her computer chair. “See you later?”

Eve nodded and waved at Ms. Reed as she passed through the living room.

After she started the car, Eve turned the radio off. She unrolled her windows now that the heat had abated. Calendars said it was autumn, but the air did not feel cool enough for autumn, not really. Only the rush of air cooled Eve down. The only telling sign of the season was the early sunset, staining the clouds rose and gold and purple before dinnertime.

The roads between Kayla's house and hers were not long enough. She had never been fond of driving, but on an evening like this—windows down, vivid sky, lanes all to herself—she could drive on into the next state.

The front door was unlocked when Eve got home. The scent of tomatoes, garlic, and basil came from the kitchen. She tried to run upstairs, but her mother rounded the corner from the kitchen to the entryway.

"Eve, that you?" her mother said.

Eve set down her book bag and joined her mother on the landing. She clutched the railing, circling the spherical top of the banister with her fingers. Her mother had still not changed out of her skirt and blouse, though she'd unbuttoned her collar and had rolled up the sleeves.

"We didn't give you that car so you could run around all day. You have to give yourself plenty of time to do homework."

Eve rolled her eyes. "I don't really have anything due tomorrow. It'll be done in half an hour."

"Then you can help me fix dinner."

"But I already ate."

Her mother started straightening up the hallway table, her face blank as if Eve wasn't standing there. "You didn't think to call before I started cooking."

"Sorry. I thought it'd be all right. Kayla's mom made us food."

Eve jumped as her mother slammed a drawer shut.

"Tough. If you're going to be late and you're not going to call, you have to put up with the consequences."

For the rest of the evening, Eve sulked. She sliced bread and washed the salad, responding with one-syllable phrases when spoken to. She ate a few bites, then folded her hands in her lap until she was excused.

In bed, she looked up at the ceiling. When she was young, she used to find patterns in the grainy surface as if she were looking up through an open roof at the sky. She wondered what it would be like to not be afraid of her mother, if they had ended up friends instead of indifferent neighbors.

#

The question of how to approach her mother still bothered Eve. She tried for a week to talk about it with Kayla, but the conversations she practiced in her head always turned out the wrong way. When she brought up mothers generally in class, Kayla would doodle caricatures of women with massive beehive hairdos and claw-like manicures. Eve bumped into people in the hallways because she could not concentrate on where she walked. She confused her pre-cal and government textbooks, but to be fair, they were both navy blue.

On Wednesday, Kayla wasn't at her locker in the morning. An unusual amount of whispering behind her shook Eve out of her thoughts. Girls giggled and talked badly about Ms. Reed. If Eve had been braver, she would have turned and around told off the girls, but all she could muster was slamming her textbook shut.

By the end of second period, Eve heard Kayla was in the principal's office. As soon as the bell rang, Eve walked to the administrative offices. Sure enough, Eve could see Kayla through the window all the way in the back of the office. Her clothes were up to regulation; they weren't baggy and she wasn't showing off more than the skin on her arms and face. Sadly, Kayla's hair had got her all the unwanted attention. The braids were nothing that Eve had not

seen before. Tiny braids in parallel lines ran close to her scalp, fake strands woven in and gathered into one giant ponytail. Girls wore their hair like that all the time. Just not white girls.

Eve took a deep breath and turned the door handle. She waved at the secretary and said that the principal had asked for her. The woman called over the phone and told her to knock before she entered.

Principal McKay sat behind his giant desk across from Kayla, who had chosen the seat closest to the outside window.

“Yes, Eve, how can I help you?” Principal McKay asked.

Eve felt embarrassed that he knew her by name. One too many honor rolls. “I wanted to hear why Kayla was in trouble.”

“I’m afraid that’s between Kayla and the school.”

Kayla crossed her arms and slumped further into the desk. “This is discrimination, and you know it.”

“Technically, yes. Miss Reed, I’m sorry, but your hairstyle is distracting your peers. Our dress code says that any clothing or grooming that causes a distraction in the classroom cannot be tolerated. I don’t want to, but, if you won’t change, I will be forced to suspend you for the rest of the day.”

Eve shot Kayla a warning glare and held out one hand. “Kayla’s never been in trouble before, and I am sure that she will promise not to do this again. Will you let me take her home so that she can take them out?”

He looked between the two girls and sighed. “All right. Just be back before your next class.”

Eve and Kayla piled into Eve's car. They remained silent during the ride home. When they got to Kayla's home, they both got out of the car.

"What makes you think that I want you to come in?" Kayla said. She stood with her back toward Eve, one foot on the first step, the other in the grass.

"Because I just saved your rear back there, that's why."

Kayla grumbled something like "Fine" and let them in the trailer.

They sat in the living room on opposite couches facing each other. Kayla turned on the TV to some science fiction B-movie.

"Do you think they'll call my mom?" Kayla asked.

The blasts grew louder, alien bodies piled up, and Eve wondered how soon they should be getting back. A thread from a doily came loose in her fingers, and she tucked it back into the knitting so Ms. Reed wouldn't notice it right away.

Kayla stood and got them sodas. She stared at her bottle cap and let the carbonation fizz out.

"I don't think so," Eve said. "Does that type of thing stay on your record?"

"Yeah, but my mom's friends with the superintendent after his wife had some type of baby problems. Mom explained it, but it's too gross to repeat. She's always saying weird things."

Eve nodded in time to the laser blasts. Her hands shook. "What was it like?" she whispered.

"You should really get back."

"At least let me help you take those braids out." Eve stood and placed a hand on Kayla's shoulders.

Kayla sat at the dining room table while Eve got the stool from her office. Eve sat behind Kayla and tilted her head forward so she could reach the ends of her weave. She untwisted each rubber band and placed them in a pile on the dining room table. She unwound each braid, ran her fingers between their twists slowly so that Kayla's hair would not tangle. Near the scalp, where the rows were even tighter, Eve had difficulty pulling them loose without a comb. When she finished, she smoothed the hair down Kayla's back. The hair crimped evenly, as if she had gotten a perm, and was smooth and shiny from the hairspray. For a while, Eve played with the waves, not wanting to stop brushing them.

Eventually, Kayla pulled Eve around to face her. "Get going."

Eve nodded, grabbed her book bag, and drove back to school.

#

As Eve entered her house, she found her mother watching the doorway. All of the lights were on and her father's survivor shows played even though his car wasn't in the driveway. Her mother probably couldn't clip recipes without the sound looping in the background. Eve set her back pack at the base of the steps and sat in the recliner.

"We received a call from Principal McKay today. You know why?"

"Obviously."

Her mother stood up. She tugged her necklace, the pearls moving side to side, sometimes catching the tag or a button. "How could you be friends with someone like that? What would college recruiters say if suspensions start showing up on your record?"

"Join the circus?" Eve felt her sides cramp up with the laughter she couldn't release. She imagined Kayla drawing a puffed-up version of her mother, her French twist piled high on the

crown of her head like a protruding alien skull, her pearls more Wilma Flintstone than Jackie Kennedy. Her mother had more jagged lines than her make-believe family portraits let on.

“Your car is gone for a week,” her mother said. “Your father will drive you.”

Eve felt the joke deflate inside her. If losing her car was the worst punishment, what was she living for? No one was going to take away her academics or her books—she had nothing like Kayla’s frayed jeans or braids or rebellion.

“If you were really concerned, you’d let me go catch up on my homework,” Eve said.

A timer buzzed in the kitchen, and there was nothing but to retreat to their separate ends of the house. Eve grabbed her bag and climbed the steps to her bedroom. After she closed the door, she opened the pre-cal textbook to the next chapter and wrote the first equation on the top of a clean sheet of paper.

HILUM

I love my husband, but each time he tried to fluff the pillows or carry me to bed, I wanted to break the bedside lamp over his head. Even though I was mobile a week after surgery, walking to the mailbox and back left me drained and limp on the couch for hours. David's sense of chivalry on overdrive reminded me all too much of the limits to my day-to-day capabilities.

"Thanks for getting the stepladder out of the garage. I unloaded the whole dishwasher today. By myself. You'd think I was one of my students, the way that felt like a major accomplishment." I plucked at a loose string in the comforter.

David changed out of his t-shirt and jeans in front of the mirror. His eyes flitted toward his reflection between loosening his belt and emptying the change from his pockets, scrutinizing the small changes in the freckles across his arms and his bicep definition. He was about to turn thirty, but you couldn't tell by his physique. He still looked like the college football player I'd fallen for. He would age well, like his dad, while I felt that my body grew older twice as rapidly than a normal person each day. Sometimes I couldn't recognize photos of myself from college. My hair had gotten darker, been cut shorter. My stomach and ass less defined, already hinting of the direction gravity would pull them in another twenty years. I hated the mirror more after my hysterectomy was performed. My stomach was swollen, an entire spectrum of spring green to plum, the dark end of a painter's palette.

"It's the least I can do," David replied as he stretched beside me on the bed. "I feel guilty, leaving you here all by yourself."

"There was no way you could take off more than two days at the firm. After the weekend, I was fine. Not queasy anymore."

Kindergartners don't need summer school, so David and I had stalled on my hysterectomy until the summer, even though I could afford the sick leave. The summer humidity made me irritable, and I wanted to scratch at my stomach with steel wool until the itch went away. I was confined and bored and relegated to lunch dates with soap opera stars. Unfortunately, David's sixty-plus-hour workweeks couldn't be interrupted, even for his wife.

David rested a hand on my thigh. I didn't move, neither encouraging nor rejecting his affection. I was too busy contemplating if the weight of the lamp would pull my stitches.

David raised his eyebrows and rolled onto his belly. He avoided eye contact. The corners of his mouth folded in, and I braced myself for the inevitable suggestion to come. Sparks of plans took hold on his brain, and there would be no persuading him otherwise, one of the qualities that made him a good lawyer and a stubborn husband.

"What you need is some company. How about a pet?"

Mental flashes of shoveling crap and vacuuming fur clashed with my desires for cleanliness and spontaneity. Even if we had little time between his law firm and my practice runs of arts-and-crafts projects for my students, David and I kept up with the housekeeping. We didn't have to fight off mountains of children's sports equipment and ballet shoes or discover a dog's half-dissolved tennis balls underneath the sofa. I'd changed college roommates after I found out one of them had a goldfish, and now didn't want to have to give up car trips on a moment's notice in exchange for Fluffy, my imaginary placeholder for a cat or dog.

"But you can't do anything with pets," I said. "At least children can accompany their parents in most public places. We don't have time to train a dog and cat litter smells awful."

"How about rats?" He studied the ceiling, the headboard, even the checks on the comforter.

I clutched our white and red quilt as if it held the solution to all of my life's problems, as if it could rewrite this conversation. I pictured an illustration from a high school history textbook of rats crowding trashy London streets, women and children sick in bed, the subtitle reading *Bubonic Plague*. "Why rats?"

"I don't know. A grade school friend of mine had them growing up and said they were better than gerbils and hamsters and way better smelling than ferrets. Plus, you're not able to walk a dog."

We reached for the lamps on both sides of the bed and switched them off. We lay on our separate halves of the bed, a body pillow between us to remind him in his sleep not to accidentally grab or kick me. I didn't think either of us needed the pillow.

"I always wanted a pet. While we have all of this down time, why not?"

The pitch of his voice rose as he spoke. I recognized a tenor of yearning for a need I'd never seen before. My students had made a dried macaroni picture my first year teaching, which David and I hung on the wall and which I stared at now. It mapped out constellations of thoughts and answers, though it would never tell me which ones were right. He'd had pets growing up. I never did, thanks to a dog bite when I was three. Then there were the patterns for the extra savings, for all of our friends, and for their beautiful, bug-eyed spawn. Saving money had seemed like the normal thing to do for a young couple, and we'd done it without thinking what we would spend the money on. I reached down and rested my palm across my bloated belly. The giant blob of red- and green-spoked noodles in the middle was my belly.

"You mean, while *I* have all of this downtime. All right—only if you promise to clean the cages yourself."

“Deal,” he said to his side of the room, his back toward me. I watched his breaths lengthen as he fell asleep. I considered talking to him, figured it was easier to speak to his sleeping back, but I closed my eyes and traced the figures on the backs of my eyelids.

#

The garage door opened. I lifted myself off the couch, pushing with my arms into a seated position, then hefted my whole body to standing with my legs. My doctor had mentioned the procedure would require some readjustments, but I never knew I’d relearn to sit and stand. Before I rounded the corner from the living room into the dining room, David was unpacking files onto the dining table.

“Hi, Lynn.” He kissed my forehead. “Have a good day?”

“I watched two women try to throw themselves off balconies and I could probably whip up three kinds of green bean casserole.”

I pushed at the back of a chair to sit down. It toppled onto its two back legs. I caught it, but my abdomen heated from the pain of moving too quickly.

David walked around the table. “Let me pull that out—”

“No. Just, no. I’d be clumsy and tear something.”

“Then let me fix dinner?”

I started crying. I tried to hide my head in my folded arms on the table. David leaned on the seatback of another chair.

“I’m sorry,” I said between tears. “I think it’s all the hormones going crazy.” My breath was hot and left a layer of moisture on the glossy surface. I lifted my face, wiped the snot on my sleeve, and stood up to go change again.

David raised his eyebrows.

“I promise, I’m not mad. I was happy you were home, then, boom, crying jag.” I left the kitchen wondering what the hell I’d be in for next.

#

A week later, we were staring into display cases of rats at Pets-o-Rama. The cases were not cages, more like dry aquariums where nothing swam. I bent over to make sure of the breathing holes at the back of the cases. I did not want the animals to escape, but I didn’t want them to die because of poor air circulation either.

David poked me in the side. He could see my puckered forehead, and, not for the first time since the surgery, I grew frustrated that someone knew me so well that there was no hiding the thoughts spinning in my mind faster than the rest of me could keep up with—and not about anything good.

“You’re still going to give it a shot, right?” he asked. He slinked an arm as gently as he could around my middle to avoid pressing my clothes against my still-sensitive stomach. “They have a return policy. If we aren’t happy, we can bring them back.”

“That’s abandonment,” I blurted and trapped myself. He would use some legalese and say I entered a verbal contract, joking as he always did with his twenty-dollar work vocabulary while mine consisted of primary colors and basic anatomy. “Not that rats would care about abandonment,” I said. They were not like people at all. In fact, the rats could be a sign of unhappiness with our situation.

So, I bent over again and focused on the rats to become accustomed to the idea of having to hold two rodents. The mice could almost be cute, their bodies compact, tails tapered off in strokes of pink. All of the rats had never-ending, corded tails. The dark brown ones certainly were too New York subway. The white ones were almost mouse-like. I watched a piebald one

nap in the corner of her aquarium tank, while the siblings—how can you really tell they are siblings?—chased each other.

“All right. But only if we get those two.” I pointed to the napping one and another who pounced on her.

David turned to find one of the Pets-o-Rama workers. One walked up in her bright orange polo and asked if she could help us. Her shirt made me queasy so I walked around to the lizard side of the tanks. She and David got a cart and went down the Small Mammals aisle for food, toys, and new home. I could hear them moving through the store because we were the only couple who took off a Wednesday afternoon to buy a couple of rats. I traced the scar under the waistband of my pants. This was my first excursion anywhere other than the backyard. Laughable, here I was using my first taste of freedom to purchase a two- to five-year commitment.

Finally, David and the woman returned. She unlocked the side door to access the tanks. We could not hear each other well through the wall of thick glass so I had to point out the two I wanted, like playing the claw crane except there was no space for a friend to stand on the side and tell me when I was perfectly lined up. Our rats were a white one and one with a kidney bean-shaped brown spot on her back, so that telling them apart would be easier. As we checked out at the front register, the cashier threw every promotion she had our way, and we caved in to them all.

At the car, we struggled to latch their transportation cage in the back seat. After the last click of the seatbelts around the cage, David cupped my hand in both of his.

“Thank you. I mean, they could be pretty amazing from what I’ve read about their mazes and sniffing out bombs.”

“They sniff out bombs? TSA needs to get in on this probe-free technology.”

“They’re still refining the process.” He thought the facts would make me want them more, and I loved him for trying.

“Let’s just hope they’ll stay in their cage. At least it’s a cage and not one of those tank things. What do you call a dry one, a terrarium? No, that’s plants.” I threw my hands up into an exaggerated shrug so he wouldn’t think I was trying to break away on purpose. His hand felt strange on mine, as if my skin were not my own anymore. I hadn’t figured out how to make this numb emotion go away and to take ownership of my body again.

David bit his lip. He got in on the driver’s side and turned on the car. “What do we call them?”

I looked back at the rats. Both had their front paws up on the walls of the cage. Their noses twitched nearly in unison. Yes, I thought, this is how your new owners smell. Maybe your fur will start to smell like this too, but I highly doubt it. I turned back around and crossed my arms. No one could tell an animal’s personality in only a few minutes.

David said, “Lucy and Ethel.”

I glared, but he focused on the road.

“Sonny and Cher,” he said.

“Do they have to be a duo?”

“All right.” His grip on the steering wheel tightened, and his tendons outlined white above the knuckles. I shut my mouth and recounted the conversation, walking the tightrope of our words and unvoiced frustrations. Part of me was sick of acting happy to avoid fights, that we had to be fake just to make things work. Part of me didn’t want to reach out to him on the other side of that balancing act. I didn’t feel fragile enough to need the help.

“Compromise?” he asked. “You name one and I name one.”

I nodded and he shouted, “Alice,” at the same time.

“Rigby. And don’t ask me where that came from because I don’t know.”

A smile settled onto David’s face, not just in his mouth, but his temples relaxed and his forehead gave up the slightly startled effect it wore when he was agitated. The rats squeaked in the backseat, probably mad that they were stuck with those names. Good.

I let him get us home before I added that we never decided which rat belonged to which name.

#

When I could no longer stand the daytime soaps, I shut off the TV and organized my school files in the study. My lesson plan binders as well as pedagogy articles and revisions to state education standards accumulated during the year still rested in a couple boxes on the floor. I sat on the carpet and flipped a lid off the first box. The assignment on top was dated mid-November and appropriately had been stamped with an orange turkey.

David knocked on the doorframe. “Nice to see you up on a weekend.”

I didn’t turn to face him, my obliques not sore but not up for rotation either. “I don’t always wait until you’re gone to come to life, you know.”

He sat in one of the matching black leather armchairs next to me. He peered into the box. I started piles to pitch, to store, and more important documents to sort later. One file finished, and I began sorting the next week.

“How many boxes do you think you’ll keep this year?” David asked.

“Honestly, I’d burn all of it, if I could.”

“Do you want to get away for a few hours?”

I set the file in my lap. “I don’t have the energy to get dressed and then to go somewhere. I’ve nearly used up my allotment of tasks for the day.”

“Then let’s plan for next weekend. You’ll be well rested by then.”

“I have no clue what I’ll feel like by then. I don’t feel like much of a person being this bloated, that’s for certain.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders. “I think you look fine.”

“Looking isn’t feeling.”

“I should have asked. How are you feeling today?”

“I’m actually in a lot of pain.” I didn’t want to talk about it. How could he understand what it was like to have an appendage taken out of you, how could I tell him that I’d forever feel as if something was missing?

“Can I get you more aspirin then?”

“David, can you just go? Please?” I indicated the doorway with my file.

He left, arms straight at his sides. I heard his footsteps climb upstairs to the girls’ room. I emptied the box and went to bed, too tired to do anything else for the rest of the day.

#

Alice and Rigby lived in the second bedroom upstairs. David came home every other day with a new chew toy or another twist of tubing for the mazes he liked to create. Each night he set up different obstacles of paper towel tubes and plastic tubs of shallow water and took pictures. I watched him from the old sofa we’d moved back upstairs from the garage, if only to escape the mounting numbers of get-well emails as the news spread around to my distant family members and friends. I only answered the phone for my father because I knew he would rather talk about fishing than my lack of a uterus.

My frustration felt worse because it was summer break. I phoned my coworkers. One was in Vermont, another in England. Beth had to work nights as a bartender, and Renee temped during the day. No one could agree on a time for coffee on such divergent schedules. David could only make it home for lunch once a week. Usually I loved summer for these reasons, because they let me finish longer projects and books I couldn't in the middle of the year. I didn't need to pause movies halfway through because it was ten and we had to get up at six; I could spend time trying on dresses in the mall, looking hemlines and fit over in the three big mirrors, rather than running hurdles to get in and out in five minutes. Now I could hardly read *Southern Hospitality* without wanting to tell Matilda Shaw where she could stuff her lemon meringues.

I missed school.

Kindergarten seems like a terror to instruct according to non-teachers I've spoken to. I certainly did not as a five-year-old look at my teacher Ms. Perry and think that I wanted to be an old maid wearing floral-patterned potato sacks too. Education appealed to me as I struggled to find a suitable subject to major in. I figured out my target age group after my math abilities capped off in the tenth grade and when discussions of the symbolism of minor objects, such as a shoe or a candlestick holder, confused me. I did not care about calculus or writing thirty-page papers when ten were just fine—the world in general fascinated me. People look at me strangely when I tell them you can go anywhere and learn most day-to-day knowledge in picture books, but it's true. Want to learn how to make and keep a best friend? Picture book. How to shop at a grocery store? Picture book. Sure you won't learn how to itemize a tax return, but you will have a balanced diet and people skills.

The news that I needed a hysterectomy was easier for me to accept than David because I realized that I have fifteen new kids each year. I have more intimate knowledge of other peoples'

pee, blood, and vomit than many hospital workers. I have seen kids' eyes and mouths round with wonder as they conduct their first science experiments or queue models for their first fashion shows from the trunks of play clothes. Sure, I would miss major life events, the first words and the graduations, but I had to believe that I was lucky for all of my other firsts too. I could teach other grades if I missed other kids, but David didn't have this opportunity.

#

I finished cleaning out my boxes and moved on to more strenuous chores. Lifting was still not allowed, but I had started stretching when I got up in the morning. If I turned slowly, I could reach to the side. I could bend over. I decided to wash the window sills and blinds, tired of dust and dead house flies. All day, the water in the pail dirtied after a pane or two since I could only fill it with a few cups. To move the bucket, I borrowed one of the girls' rolling carts we kept downstairs so they could play. By the end of the afternoon, I'd finished the kitchen, study, and half the living room, all the while making circuits back and forth to the sink.

I sat on the couch, proud I'd made it so far around the first floor.

David slammed the door. I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep, and I rubbed the exhaustion from my eyes. The cable box clock read seven. He must have been held up at the firm.

"I wish I could sleep all day," he said.

"If you'll notice our sparkling kitchen windows, you'll see my nap was well earned."

I opened the pantry and stared at the cans as if they'd help me decide between pot roast and five-bean soup.

"Everything all right at work?"

"Our latest case is not going well."

I pulled cans from the shelves and set them next to the stove. "Want to talk about it?"

“No. I think I’ll go play with the girls.” Usually he shared more information about his clients and cases than I ever cared to know. He sighed and straightened the mail on the counter.

“Can’t you feed them and come help me make dinner?”

“Why don’t you want to include Alice and Rigby in anything we do?”

The next-door neighbor’s dog barked. Through our back windows, I saw kids spraying each other with a hose. The young girl ran in a circle and squealed with laughter. When I finished cleaning downstairs, I thought I should invite the neighbors over for dinner.

“Why does this have to be about rats that I didn’t want in the first place? It’s not about the rats.”

David opened his briefcase with such force, I thought he’d break the hinges. “You could have said something.”

“I did say—”

“Right after you got done kissing me, or hugging me goodnight. Wait, we don’t do that anymore either.”

I set down my spoon. His silhouette reflected on the microwave door. Shadow David had his hands in his pockets and stared directly at my back.

“David, the doctor said.”

“I don’t give a damn about the doctor. I’m going out to get dinner.” He grabbed his keys from the counter and walked back into the garage.

The soup bubbled. I looked at it, at the burner knob, and at the splashes of tomato base on the stovetop. I didn’t want to eat soup by myself for the next three days.

#

Three days later, David came downstairs with a rat on each shoulder.

“Could the girls eat dinner with us in the kitchen?” He lifted an arm and Rigby, the one with the brown spot on her back, walked to his hand. “She wants you to hold her.”

While I doubted that my husband could read fuzzy little rat thoughts, I took Rigby in my palms. I held her for David’s sake. She chewed on one of my fingernails while David passed me a treat with his free arm.

“By eat with us, you mean they stay in their cage off the carpet while we sit at the table?” I replied. He was testing the boundaries, but I would be as accepting as I could be.

“Of course. I just don’t think that they like being left alone so frequently. If we’re home, they like to be where we are. Have Rigby sit up. Just say ‘up’ and hold the treat above her head.”

Rigby sat on her haunches and took the treat from my hovering fingertips. The digits of her paws spread wide to hold the treat. Her teeth moved at an unintelligible speed, and soon she looked at me and sniffed expectantly.

“What if they get out?”

David shrugged. “So what? It’s not like they’re going to run away and make camp in your cabinets. They’ll come when we call their names.” He picked up Rigby and set her by Alice’s side on the coffee table, taking turns calling each one across to the opposite edge to demonstrate.

Then David had me hold them as he brought down their small cage and their running wheels. We made dinner together for the first time in nearly a month, an improvement from heating something in a microwave during the day or having David bring dinner to the living room on trays. He rotated chicken in the frying pan while I cut up potatoes and green beans. The popping oil and the sizzling beans were comforting, normal noises. We bumped into each other

only once as we struggled to regain our usual flow. If our conversation halted, we talked to Alice and Rigby and made up their responses in squeaky voices.

“I thought you were supposed to have a pick-up game with the guys soon?” I asked, making conversation.

“I think I’ve finally given it up,” David replied. “My knee is making me slower than the others. Might as well stop before they realize it too.”

His news made me almost forget to stop adding pepper.

“Maybe we’re finally getting a little, you know, old,” he added.

I threw a dishtowel at him and laughed. The running wheel stopped spinning and a burst of squeaking emerged. David went to check on the emergency, but it was probably only a little sibling rivalry. I never had a brother or a sister, and sometimes I looked at the rats with jealousy when they curled up next to each other for warmth or companionship.

#

Getting ready for bed had slowly turned into my least favorite time of the day. I dreaded taking off my clothes to get in the shower. I pushed my thumbs in between the elastic band of my sweatpants and my skin, pulled them down slowly, bending more with my knees than my hips to slide them around my ankles. While the swelling around my scar had reduced and the coloring of my skin returned to normal, I still felt its presence like a white-hot brand. The scar was conspicuously placed. Eventually, I would be able to wear all of my old clothes, but my bikini would have to be thrown away for one-pieces. I even considered getting rid of all my lingerie but the corsets that covered my stomach—not like I was getting use out of them anyway.

I stepped into the shower stall. The heat spread from my back down my arms and legs while the water soaked my hair. I took the washcloth and scrubbed my skin as slow as if each body part were new, grown in yesterday.

David came in to brush his teeth. I felt conscious because he didn't make any small talk.

Then he said, "You can tell me if something's wrong, Lynn," over the noise of the running water.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Are you mad at me for some reason? Do I need to take more time off? I can bring the paperwork home. All you have to do is tell me."

I turned the faucet. The water cut off. "Can you hand me the towel?"

Though it was well within my reach, he walked over and handed it over the door. While I dried off, I had the urge to brush out the kinks in his hair. He stepped out of reach to the sink. The countertop behind him was strewn with more bottles than usual. My lotions and perfume were out of order, and the tissue box was empty even though there were full ones in the closet. The clean towels were thrown in a bin. Each mistake was a little criticism.

"I know it takes a while to recover, but I thought we would be back to normal by now. At least that the giant pillow would be gone."

Water dropped from my hair onto my back, cool now from the AC. I pulled the towel tighter around me. "I know," I whispered.

"You know I can feel you flinch when I try to put my arm around you in bed. Don't pull that 'you won't understand' stuff because I can understand if you just talk to me."

He put both his hands on my hips. I tried to ignore the throbbing near my scar. It'd healed, so this self-consciousness was imaginary.

David edged closer, none of his usual insistent pulling. He kissed my forehead then my neck and shoulders. I wrapped my arms around him. We stood there until I felt his shirt dampen from my hair. I slid my hand from his shoulder and laced my fingers through his.

“The doctor said a minimum of six weeks,” I said.

“I’ve read all the guides too.”

And he had too, probably more times than I did. He offered to make tea, but I was ready for bed. He left the bathroom. I pulled on one of his old football t-shirts. By the time I’d finished, he was already asleep.

#

In the morning, I promised to help out with the girls more. David’s case was in overdrive, and the entire firm was working more hours. Chores got easier each day. I could vacuum an entire story at once. I resumed cooking and washing the dishes afterward. I started a new binder for next year’s lesson plans.

After evenings playing with Alice and Rigby, I helped carry the rats’ toys upstairs. Their bedroom still had the unisex yellow wallpaper we’d picked when we first moved in, but now the room belonged to the rats. The sunny wallpaper matched their energy levels. I felt as if I should knock when I entered, as if a person slept here and not animals. Strewn everywhere were signs of habitation—purple food dishes and the plastic tub they could swim in. Ramps connected most of the furniture as if little mythological Brownies had built a city overnight.

As a gift to David, I cut stars to hang from the ceiling, ten of various sizes, one letter each to spell out “Alice” and “Rigby.” I took out from keepsake boxes some of my students’ old drawings, gifts to me on Christmases and Valentine’s, and hung them. At least the projects gave me something to do sitting down between my other chores.

Children teach you how to clean up and move on. When one of my students wet his pants for the third time in a week, I did not weep and pull my hair out. Instead, I let the other kids have five more minutes at their play stations while I got his extra change of clothes from his cubby, called the janitor while he dressed in the bathroom, then double-bagged a surprise for his parents in the carpool line. If one of my students has a bad day, they are usually upbeat by the next. Tempers come one minute and dissipate in another.

Since it was my day to take care of Alice and Rigby, I cleaned their cage and put out new bedding. The cedar chips no longer smelled unfamiliar, something pulled off a farm and plopped into suburbia. I moved Alice and Rigby back into their big cage and rolled them out of their room. It was strange, accommodating rats, moving their cage so that they would not be scared of the vacuum cleaner.

When the room was clean as I could make it, the girls and I went downstairs, grabbed a box of Fruit Loops, and sat in front of the television. David would not be home from work until late, so I picked out a movie. I set the small travelling cage at the edge of the coffee table and opened the door. Alice and Rigby responded as I called their names, one at a time, moving into my palms for a treat. I felt their calm heartbeats in my hands. I set them on the couch next to me.

The girls curled up on my stomach and fell asleep halfway through a romantic comedy. Alice used her sister for a pillow. I enjoyed watching them rise up and down with my breath. Even the warmth of their bodies comforted my stomach. During the credits, Alice kept snoring, but Rigby got up to explore. She sniffed my t-shirt then the waistband of my jeans, one of the old pairs I was just beginning to feel comfortable wearing again, all of the post-surgery swelling gone.

“Want to see my scar?” I whispered, hoping not to disturb Alice. I pulled up part of my shirt to reveal a long puckered line that ran horizontal across my stomach. “My doctor says it looks like a hilum. Like on a bean. I guess that’s where they connect to the plant.”

Rigby sniffed near the scar, which tickled. After the pain had disappeared, my scar tissue had been numb. Now, I could sense her soft paws and sniffing nose. I picked her up and set her face-to-face with me. I pulled over the box of Fruit Loops, ate a couple myself, and gave Rigby two.

“Thanks for listening.” That could be one of their new tricks, *Listen. Sympathize.*

We would have a few years to perfect it.

David returned home and sat next to me on the couch. Alice jumped up to greet him. I kept scratching Rigby’s head. David and I held hands, fed our rats more Fruit Loops, and watched them run from one piece of furniture to another to find treats.

PIAZZA

Queenie stood above Glen's bed. She hummed his favorite lullaby, a Scottish song her grandmother used to sing. Glen was asleep, his chest rising slow and his forehead damp from dreaming. She bent her hand toward his hair, but paused. If she woke him, he would be irritable the next morning at breakfast, which would further aggravate his father after a long night with little sleep.

Dan was late coming home. He had a meeting, he'd told her, but the hands on the clock were close to striking ten. What could they possibly talk about *for hours*?

Queenie shut the bedroom door and walked downstairs to the living room. She sat on the couch and flipped through her appointment book week after week, landing mid-November though it was only February. She had already dusted, wiped the counters, adjusted the drapes then rearranged them back to the way they'd been before. She knew exactly how many silver spoons had gone missing since the War of Northern Aggression—three—from polishing them all the nights that Dan was absent.

She needed to reorder silver polish, in fact.

At least tomorrow she had a luncheon to take her mind off other troubles. The debutante ball was only a week away, and final arrangements were more hectic this year than any Queenie had been a member of the Society. Queenie had made motions to reduce the name from the pompousness of *The Society of Ladies for the Preservation of St. Clair* down to the more reasonable *The Preservation Society*, but it was the only movement she had been unable to pass. Otherwise, she enjoyed planning dances, organizing seating charts, and imagining new

fundraisers. Some women wanted jobs, wanted fame and success and all that those entailed; Queenie wanted finely-pressed white tablecloths and blue asters in the centerpieces.

Queenie turned off the lamp and double-checked the locked door. She paused at her bedroom then walked down the hall to the guest room. She fluffed the pillows and lay on top of the comforter. No one had bothered over the centuries to put crown molding in either of the back two rooms, which were intended for children or short-term guests. There were fewer windows on this side of the house facing the neighbor's yard. Though no one would reasonably be up at this hour on a weeknight, Queenie left the blinds shut. She missed staring up at the stars through the door to the piazza, wrapped in one of Dan's great-aunt's quilts. She had always joked that she had married Dan for his porch. Lately, she was starting to believe it.

#

When she woke the next morning, Queenie could not remember why she was in the guest room. She stumbled into the hallway, using the walls to find her bearings. Glen sniffled and she pushed open his door. Dawn glowed pale through the white curtains.

"How's my prince?"

"Hungry."

Queenie laughed and picked him up. She washed his hands and face—he only fussed to wipe the sleep from his eyes—then dressed him in a blue collared shirt and navy trousers and carried him downstairs.

"Good morning," Dan said. He folded over the top of his newspaper and speared a section of his grapefruit with the serrated spoon.

"Morning."

"For a moment, I'd thought you'd run away on me."

Queenie poured her mug half full of coffee and topped it off with milk. “I would never...unless I took my prince with me.” She smiled at Glen.

Glen looked back and forth, trying to grasp the context of their conversation. “Momma, let’s go on a trip.”

“And that will never happen.” Dan smirked and continued reading the newspaper without glancing in her direction.

While she waited for Glen to finish his breakfast, she wiped away the coffee grounds Dan had trailed across the counter. She held her breath and scrubbed at the brown stains. Glen had been seeing too many arguments lately to do him any good, so she kept her criticism in her throat like a bird rattling a cage.

“I’ll be at work late again.”

“Again? I was planning on making a roast.”

Dan placed the paper on the table and stood up. The grapefruit slumped wetly into the garbage pail he threw it in. “Make it tomorrow.”

“Planning anything is difficult with you around.”

Dan kissed the side of her head, a hard peck that nearly pushed her off balance. As he walked away, he said, “I’ll do the planning for the Demerests, thank you.”

If she’d had something heavy within reach, Queenie might have thrown it. Maybe wrap the telephone cord around his neck. Instead, she leaned over the sink. Glen tapped away on the table with his spoon, all but ignoring the food in front of him, wrapped up in the pleasant sounds of their voices and the seemingly cordial manner between them.

Queenie forced herself to keep busy until her meeting. She changed into a black wool dress that hid the fat she could not get rid of from her pregnancy. The pearls she clasped around

her neck had been a wedding present from her father-in-law. He and his wife had stayed long enough for their grandson to be born, then packed up for an island somewhere off the coast of Florida. Queenie didn't know too many of the details, but she didn't care. She had her house and her son and Dan's name in order to remain a member of the Society.

After she put Glen in his stroller, she dropped him off at the sitter's a few blocks down, then walked to the docks to the King Mackerel, somewhere Queenie's mother would have never been seen at her age, but it had been redone by Violet's parents into a quite fashionable St. Clair tourist trap.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Demerest," the hostess said.

It still made Queenie self-conscious to be called *Mrs. Demerest*. It was the name of the woman who had scolded her friends for staying out late and who taught them the fox trot for their debuts.

The rest of Queenie's friends had already been seated. The only women who mattered in the Society, perhaps in all of St. Clair, sat at her table. They were her best friends ever since their mothers laid them side-by-side in cribs as infants, all old St. Clair families, all old money. *Indigo blood*, her grandmother used to joke.

Queenie sat in the remaining empty chair. A small card with the few lunch choices lay just beyond her folded napkin. The sweet tea glass sweated, and she brought her hand to it, cooling her hot palm. They had all waited for her. Queenie ordered she-crab soup and a side salad. She smiled, realizing that each of the other women had ordered the same meal.

"Such strange weather we've been having," Violet said. "If this keeps up, it'll be positively blazing for the ball."

"Perhaps we should plan to wear boleros instead of sleeves," said Amelia.

“Well I already bought my dress and I’ll wear it even if it means I have to sweat more than a football player,” Eleanor said.

Queenie smiled at Eleanor, who lived up to the boldness of her namesake. Eleanor liked being Vice President of the Society because it made her seem less pushy. At least, that’s what she said.

Queenie wanted to reach out and hold Eleanor’s hand, the way they used to do when they ran gossiping and laughing to school each morning.

The ladies ate and conducted business as the lunch crowd dissipated.

When Amelia called her name, Queenie read from her note cards. She tried to sound as weightless as a fish floating in the tide, but it was no use. As she walked to her seat, a few fellow members patted her arms. At least, she realized, she could count on the ladies to support her, which they did with their usual clapping and cheerful twittering.

“What’s wrong?” Violet whispered.

Queenie looked up from picking at a loose thread in her napkin. “What do you mean?”

“Normally, you run the show. You look like you don’t know which way is supposed to be down.”

Amelia, who was presenting, coughed conspicuously.

Queenie waved off Violet and mouthed “Later.” Underneath the table cloth, she felt Eleanor swat at her with a napkin.

Queenie tried her best to focus. She sipped spoonfuls of soup, which was too watery. The oyster crackers tasted stale. At least she had a view of the water, which sparkled at the crests of the waves created by the giant freighters inching away from the factories farther upstream. Queenie didn’t know why, but, in winter, the water looked bluer, less like the murky summer

blue-green. The water was the happiest shade of gray she had ever seen, maybe a good color for a baby girl's room, if she could ever convince Dan to have another child.

Everyone clapped, and Queenie followed suit. The women at the other tables stood and said their goodbyes until it was just the four of them.

Amelia crossed her arms. "I'm fit to bursting with jealousy, talking while I couldn't join in. Queenie, I could have used your support on changing the flower arrangements this year."

"Sorry, Dan has been working late."

The women remained silent. Violet and Amelia exchanged glances, exaggerated wide eyes and lips drawn to keep from saying what they already knew. They were never the most subtle of women.

"There've been rumors," Eleanor said.

When no one else would speak up, Queenie laid an open palm on the table. She took a breath and released it as quietly as she could. Perhaps choosing to trust Dan had been the naïve move, but she could not let the rumors continue, especially for Glen's sake. "I don't care what everyone is saying. I just want it to stop." She leveled her eyes at each of the women, hoping that the look appeared serious and unyielding.

"He always was a charmer," Amelia said, then giggled. Queenie didn't mind it. Amelia had gone out on two dates with Dan then declared him impossible.

Eleanor laughed. "We all know that Dan isn't afraid of anybody. What you need to do is threaten his manhood, give him something to fear."

"Here we go with the feminism talk again."

"Don't get too wound up or you'll want to run outside, rip off your pantyhose, and burn them right there on the sidewalk."

“Perhaps why she can’t seem to stay married is her husbands run out of money to pay for new stockings.”

Eleanor ripped two pieces off a dinner roll and threw them at Violet and Amelia. They brushed the crumbs away. Queenie smiled at her best friend.

Violet leaned toward the center of the table and said in a lowered voice, “She’s right, though.”

Her friends were supportive, but not creative. Violet stared down the fabric flowers on the table while Amelia scanned the waves, a broad smile permanently stuck to their faces just like the sewn black threads on Glen’s stuffed animals. Only Eleanor bit her lip, but she would not say anything more in front of the other two girls.

The four of them picked up their handbags and left the restaurant. Queenie kissed the girls goodbye, then wandered, putting off picking Glen up. She walked east up streets then west down the next. She walked as far as the old market, surrounded now by chain stores. There was always talk about starting up the market again, but who would bother with old knickknacks when there were perfectly good department stores in town?

At the last bench before her turn off to the babysitter’s, Queenie sat down. The seat was only marginally dirty, judging from the bit of gray her glove picked up on the armrest.

#

Her world was on fire. Queenie remembered only feeling this lost when she first met Dan. At night, her father would watch soldiers pulling out of Cambodia and Vietnam, the IRA bombing London, too much hate for her heart to bear listening to night after night. Her mother’s stories of the Second World War didn’t seem to align with this experience at all. Young women protested for equal rights with men, yet her entire life had been devoted to becoming a quiet and

respectful lady. She wanted to care, was taught at school that she should devote her life to politics and serving others, but all that diminished through her mother's instruction. Sit up straight, ankles crossed, smile cemented in place by cream lipstick so thick it felt like plaster.

Dan confused things even more.

They'd met through Amelia, whose family had been closest to the Demerests. Everyone expected her and Dan to marry, but neither was interested in the other, raised as close as siblings. Amelia had said it was like trying to picture kissing an uncle.

When Dan pulled up to Queenie's house in his convertible, robin's egg blue like he'd seen in films, his brown hair tossed from the wind, the top button of his shirt undone, Queenie knew she was lost forever. The explosions she heard on TV had internalized themselves somehow then went off in her brain, making her lose touch of everything real around her.

When his hand grabbed hers in the movie theater, it was sweaty and large and safe, but it could not fight away the feeling inside of her that somehow this would all be lost before the sun rose the next morning.

The world spun all the way until she had walked down the aisle, tossed her bouquet, and had landed in one of the finest single houses with one of St. Clair's most prominent young men.

#

Queenie wore red because it went well with her chestnut-colored hair. Everyone liked to say it made her seem a bit more firey, amplifying an aspect of her personality she'd never been aware that she possessed. She stepped into her black pumps, the ones that used to be for dancing when Dan would take her out. She'd had them resoled, and with polish they appeared about as good as new. The others would wear paler spring clothing, but as a mother, she could wear anything that she wanted. It was strange how much freedom having Glen had afforded her.

She glanced at her lipstick in the mirror and adjusted the neckline to lay flat.

Dan got dressed in the walk-in closet. He emerged with his collar up, his tie hanging loose around his neck. “Could you straighten this for me?”

Queenie stretched out her arms and waved him forward. She loosened it and retied the knot. “Where’s the shirt I bought you for Christmas? This one has a stain where that accountant friend of yours spilt his wine.”

“I’ll be wearing my jacket, it’s no problem.”

“Then why did I waste all of that money?”

Dan turned back to the dresser. His reflection pushed around keys and change in search of cuff links. “Why did you?”

They locked eyes. They stared at each other until Queenie turned her eyes away and rearranged the perfume bottles on her dresser for the third time. It felt as if she had been interacting with his reflection ever since they’d discovered she was pregnant with Glen.

The doorbell rang.

Queenie said, “It’s the sitter. Don’t bother, I’ll get it.”

The rustling in Glen’s room meant he must have been woken up from his nap by the bell. Queenie went downstairs to let the girl in, then got Glen from his bed. His feathery hair stuck up everywhere. She brushed the curl down and away from his forehead. When he grew older, when his legs stretched longer and his permanent teeth filled in, she knew she would miss stroking his fine, damp hair after his naps.

“Momma, I dreamed you flew away like a bird.” He frowned and hugged her. He smelled of soap and the strange, almost water-like scent of his skin, not dirty, but the essence of a little boy who most feared that his mother would sprout feathers and leave St. Clair forever.

He was almost too much to carry as she lifted him and walked downstairs.

Dan appeared after Queenie finished giving the girl instructions.

“Shall we?” Dan asked. He held out his arm for Queenie to take.

Town Hall looked conspicuously quiet. Families exited cars, which valets drove away behind buildings or to parking lots blocks away. The Society did not like to draw attention to any of its gatherings—which were family affairs really, for all the marriages within their circle and hereditary membership. The word *exclusive* made Queenie itch.

For a February night, the weather was unseasonably warm. Frosts were all but giving up their hold on the coast, and soon the air would grow humid again, the weighty feeling of it pressing on Queenie’s bare arms, reminding her that there was something between her and the sky to hold her to the earth. Light from streetlamps shaped like old gas lanterns played on the undersides of the oak leaves. Queenie and Dan passed between the two giant trees that framed the sidewalk and threatened to break through the Town Hall windows.

They dropped off heavy jackets in the foyer, then passed into the dining room. Nearly two centuries ago, this had been the site of holiday feasts and dances. Now it barely could hold the expanded families of the Society. Queenie and Dan sat at the table closest to the raised platform where the debutantes would be presented. There were ten girls this year, a healthy number. They’d hired a local artist to create a painting for the fundraiser, and the background of the menu cards featured parts of the painting. Dan complimented her on the hard work evident in the place settings, but his sincerity was hard to discern around swallows of scotch.

Violet opened the proceedings. Queenie watched as each girl descended from the waiting room on the second floor to the stage. Queenie reached for Dan’s hand and squeezed it. He raised his eyebrows, but he didn’t take his hand away until he was able to make the pretense of

lifting his glass to his lips. No one else at the table had been watching, their attentions focused on the stage. When the long walks to the stage had been accomplished and the biographies read, everyone sat at their tables.

The excitement of debuting in society was evident in the girls' smiles and straight, proud postures. Queenie remembered feeling so anxious at her ball that she couldn't eat anything all night. The tulle under her skirt had been hot and pressed on her legs, but the way it flared when her dance partners spun her was magic. Punch had never tasted sweeter, waltzes had never before or again seemed so romantic. Only later could Queenie put a name to the atmosphere of her ball. She'd felt cherished. She never envied men because their families never came together to simply celebrate one such moment of their lives. Queenie could love Glen as much as she could, but this was something they could never share.

As Violet walked by, she placed a hand on Queenie's shoulder and winked.

"What was that for?" Dan asked.

"Oh, you know Violet. She was so happy it was her year in the rotation to be the speaker."

Dan picked up his scotch. "She was always a gossip. You would have figured a husband would have shut her up." He took a sip. At least he wasn't slouching or slurring yet, but he still appeared bored. Queenie tried to follow the line of his staring, but she could make out no one particular in the crowd.

Eleanor sat on the far side of the table, well out of earshot of easy conversation. Queenie talked with an older couple whose granddaughter would debut in a couple years.

After dinner was Queenie's favorite part of the ball, the dancing. Younger couples filled the dance floor, the few teenagers who cared to attend with their parents or newlyweds without

worry about small children at home. The debutantes showed off their lessons. Each way she looked around the room, people smiled and waved to her, the ever widening circle of her influence evident in their cheerful responses to her. Except in the corner where Dan stood with his single accountant friend talking to a group of young ladies.

Queenie pulled back her shoulders and ignored the pit of cowardliness in her stomach telling her to remain seated in her chair, quiet and meek. Dan's friend saw her and scuttled away. Queenie let him go.

"Dan, I think you've had enough to drink tonight." She rubbed his arm.

He pulled at his shirt sleeves. "I feel fine."

"Darling, you know how upset your stomach gets when you have too much. You older men, health problems stacking by the day." Queenie winked at her audience and put her hands on her hips as if she were scolding her son and not her husband. She turned to the girls. "Enjoying the evening?"

The younger women giggled. Not one wore a wedding ring. Their fantasies of men still contained nothing of the realities of feeding them and nursing their hangovers and accepting the blame for arguments.

"Can I talk to you?" Dan asked.

She took a deep breath and projected, "You know Glen wouldn't want you to miss out on most of tomorrow. You promised him you'd take him to the park." A lie. Dan hardly played with Glen, but Queenie figured that was due more to Glen's age and inability to throw a baseball than Dan's deficiencies as a father.

"I'm fine."

She dragged the corners of her mouth downward. Her mother would have lectured her for a week straight for ever showing a face like that in public. Instead she remembered explosions and that sometimes burning was necessary for new growth.

“Excuse us. We’ll leave you two alone. We’re going to dance.” The girls slinked away.

“You girls have a good night. You all should come to the next Society meeting.” Queenie let out a long sigh.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?”

Dan took her arm and tried to pull her further into the corner of the hall. Queenie leaned her weight against his. Neither moved.

“Nothing. Looking out for you, if you’d have the common sense to notice.”

Dan let go. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. The people around them had gone silent and barely veiled their staring. He smiled at them, the smile Queenie recognized as the one he wore in public—not the real smile from their wedding night or when he first held Glen in his arms, the smile she had not seen in months, maybe even years.

“Let’s just say I’m placing a bet,” Queenie said. “I’m betting you do nothing to spoil our son’s reputation before he has a chance to do so for himself. I’m also betting you’re more scared of me than you realize.”

“Go back to your candle holders and napkin folds.”

Queenie faced the room. She turned a semi-circle slowly, making sure the show was attracting as much attention as it could. “Oh, my dear, you’re right. That will keep the town from dissecting your problems until there’s nothing left to your name. Maybe Glen would like being a Stuart better than a Demerest.”

He paled.

“Go get some water then sit back down.”

Queenie circled the room, checking on her guests before returning to her seat. She watched Dan do as she'd said then walk back to her. His face was deflated, though how much was from the alcohol and how much from age they'd see in the morning.

Dan stuck to her side for the first time in years.

Queenie rested her chin on her folded hands. “I'm tired. Someone from the office can take you home.”

Dan nodded. He found friends to stand with but did not laugh as hard as they did at the jokes Queenie could not hear from tables away. His hands were tucked in his pockets, no drink, no keys to take him away from St. Clair. When she was sure he would cause no more trouble, she had the valet bring the car around, then drove home.

#

When the babysitter was paid, Queenie checked on Glen, safe and snoring in his bed. He was almost everything she'd ever wanted in life, but the rest she would probably never get. Marriage never promised companionship, only tax breaks and someone to eat breakfast with in the morning. She fixed a pot of decaffeinated coffee and took a cup and a blanket out on the piazza. She planned to put in more roses this year. From the vantage point of five feet above ground, she surveyed the plots, planning the shape of the garden and how to fill it over time. Anything good was worth taking years to develop and she would not budge from this piazza until she saw out all the roses and generations of healthy azaleas.

She had lost track of time when Dan emerged from a friend's car. He stumbled up the driveway, then looked up at the house. Queenie set aside her blanket and met him at the top of

the stairs. Six-foot-even didn't seem so large from where she stood. His jacket was slung over one arm and his hands were still in his pockets.

Queenie moved aside so he could enter the house. "When you make it to the guest bedroom, be sure you don't wake up Glen."

Dan climbed one step at a time. Queenie tried to separate this sloppy man from the handsome one she'd fallen in love with years before, the one she'd polished shoes and ironed shirts for when they'd still gone on dates. She wouldn't want to be those people now, but she had to hope they could create something workable out of this situation.

As the door shut, Queenie turned back to her piazza. She imagined the music from the dance. A slow waltz began, and she lined up with her invisible partner. One, two three, back left, stop. She circled the furniture, the ends of her dress brushing chairs and the blanket drooping across the table. She bowed to the street, to the azaleas, and, at last, to her neighbors.

STARING AT THE MOON

The kettle whistles, and Lorena screams and throws her cereal on the floor. I reach for paper towels and freeze, leaning against the cabinets on locked elbows and knees. We are the last two Pickens of my great-great grandfather's lineage, and what a spectacle we both make, crying in the kitchen like infants and letting our breakfasts go to waste. When Lorena's whimpers settle into a pattern of dry hiccups, I drop the spoon I hadn't realized I'd been carrying and cover my face with my hands. The urge to run away, to lie in a field and sleep until I am covered with dirt and goldenrod and pine needles, lives deep in my belly, wrapped around my spinal cord like a weed with roots spread so deep no trowel could dig it out.

I focus on the wall clock, count the seconds as if measuring them out tick after tick could make them more manageable, easier to dismiss. The kettle still whistles. I pick up an oven mitt, transfer it to another burner, and throw in a few bags of store-brand Lipton. Lorena has already eaten what little cereal there was left in her bowl and she shows me her empty cup. Food gone, juice gone, see Mommy, all better? She looks at me, her eyes and cheeks red with anger and the burn of salt from her tears, but she has stopped expecting me to make things better. I pick her up. She doesn't hug me in return, but tells me I need to hurry because it's Friday and they get to play dress up before class on Fridays instead of sitting on their numbered spots on the rug while struggling to read ABC and counting books. I don't care that she's covered in milk, and now I'll have to change again before work.

I don't tell her that it'll be okay. Five years old, she's already much too smart for such an empty platitude. Instead, I set her on the floor, grab her hand, and walk with her to her bedroom. Her clothes are set out from the night before, and I realize the socks have different color

trimming, clumsily folded in the low light of the room. I hope she doesn't notice before we get home this afternoon. Last time I didn't match her clothes just right, she bit a girl during recess. Pickens women can be a little wild, but Lorena must have gotten her temper from her father. Mornings are the hardest. Sometimes we get through all right, only shoes on wrong feet or shirts inside out. Most days, though, we scramble to accomplish the basics—breakfast, clothes, backpack—and leave the rest to chance.

I'd give anything for an extra hand, but the years have convinced me that even the devil won't stop to listen to my pleas. There have been men at Civil War reenactments, tall men with shining eyes and laughter sprung deep from their bellies, but I choose to come home alone. Lorena's father, Paul, was beautiful. He could have walked right out of the forest, an old stag god, hair as brown as tree trunks, eyes green as the first leaves in spring. Lorena doesn't know who her father is, but a fair amount of the town can make a good guess. If my mother had been around, she would have taken one look at Paul and threatened him with one shake of her spatula. I'd tried to avoid him after my boss, Mr. Lee, introduced us, but it was hard to hide in my daddy's old pickup while riding into town for work. Paul was walking down the sidewalk, a piece of paper in his hand, as if he were surveying a newly acquired treasure. He would glance up at one of the building numbers, then back down. He saw me from across the street, flagged me down to stop, and crossed the street, nearly getting run over by Mrs. Branham in the process.

"I was hoping to run into your boss, but you'll do," he said

"You'll have to wait another hour at least. He's never in the office when it opens." I inched the truck forward.

Paul leaned his arm against the window frame. "Can't I say hello?"

“You’ve said it. I will be late for work.” I gripped the steering wheel and stared at the office a block away. Cars turned around us, unperturbed by the road block—a little detour was nothing compared to county roads blocked half a mile back by tractors.

“Have dinner with me?”

I have never seen that type of desperation on a man’s face directed at me before or since. Mr. Lee wore that look when he passed younger, firmer women than his wife, the other associates when they walked to lunch to see Mrs. Branham’s daughter at the diner two blocks down—the type of endless look in the eyes and lips drawn into flat lines that meant nothing good.

Before I finish getting dressed for the second time this morning, I examine my work table. My fingertips brush the tubes and wires arranged by size in an old shoebox with cardboard dividers. My hair is too short, and when I run my fingers through it, I’m left feeling the air all too quickly. Short locks of hair are good for creating pictures of roses and weeping willows, but long strands are necessary for earring and bracelet braids. Cable twist—one, seven, two, eight, three—twist braid, sixteen square chain, flat twist chain.

I collected books when I could spare part of my salary, bought copper tubes and wires and weights at the hardware store, and asked for hair donations from salons until I got regular volunteers at reenactments and plantation museums—mostly other women and the soldiers whose uniforms must be recreated by hand, exactly as they used to be sewn by wives and sisters and patched up by men on the march. My requests did get me quite a few strange looks, and most places still won’t let me take away their unwanted hair, afraid in some old Biblical Samson and Delilah way that I will do things to them with these remains. Last week, I cut Lorena’s hair

for the first time in a long while, six inches only, but I will find a use for it somehow. Though she was born with nearly snow-white hair, it comes in darker and darker each season.

“Momma,” Lorena calls from her bedroom.

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We are the last two Pickens, and I want to run away and be as nameless as the leaves in the trees and the gusts of wind that move them. My mother made this option look so easy. When my brothers left for Vietnam, Momma shut in on herself. Before, she’d always cared that I didn’t turn out to be much of a tomboy and would be angry when I ran loose all over the county with my brothers, just as wild as the deer and the foxes and the owls in the woods. Every night before bed, she would brush my hair and sing to me. She helped me choose my dresses for school for show-and-tell and on holidays. She liked to turn the radio to “Do You Love Me” or “Big Girls Don’t Cry,” and she would grab my arms and twirl me around the kitchen. She only got up from her bed to use the bathroom and to attend their funeral after Sam and John left. Sometimes I wish I could leave, give Lorena to someone who will brush the tangles out of her hair without bringing tears to her eyes, someone who knows how to pick out dresses and socks right, but the dryer buzzer rings or the noodles boil over.

Lorena and I leave the house by a quarter to eight. The starter turns over, but doesn’t want to kick the rest of the car into life. I hit the steering wheel twice, curse, and the engine turns on. Seeing a mechanic is too far down my list of necessary repairs, but most people with old houses and cars and bodies have way too many problems anyway, so I can forgive myself until I someday break down on the side of the road.

Though one child is enough for me to manage, sometimes I wish Lorena had siblings to depend upon, to draw her from her make-believe worlds, or the ones she worships of facts about

velociraptors and flowering dogwoods, or her worries when the lights shut off when I pay the electricity bill late. I wish I could see my kin in her appearance as I watch her play in the rearview mirror on the way to the elementary school, but Lorena has her father's dark features, not at all a blonde-and-blue-eyed Pickens like me or my brothers.

I loved my daddy more than any man besides Paul, and it hurts to know that Lorena will never know Paul the way I knew Daddy. My first memories all involve his nasally voice or the rough feeling of his hands around mine as he taught me how to hold a reel or how to pull weeds from the garden without leaving their roots in the ground. We used to cross the corn field on foot together in the evenings. The stalks rose taller than my head, deep green, the leaves tickling my cheeks and my arms. On the way back, I complained of being tired, and Daddy let me hold onto one of his legs. He pretended to be the giant from the Jack and the Beanstalk stories and that I was little Jack. I clutched my elbows as tight as I could, doubling my arms around his calf, but we never made it more than a couple steps before my hands slipped. Then he took me up in his brown arms. His rough work shirt tickled my skin. I could have stayed in his arms forever, even when we came home to the smell of Momma's cornbread, the thing I loved second most in the world, admittedly even more than Momma most days. I didn't understand as a child what I was saying.

Lorena lines up with the rest of the kindergarteners from the carpool. She is smaller than most of the other kids, but stands straighter and fidgets less. She watches the bigger children who are allowed to walk the hallways on their own with wide eyes. Her independence will only grow. She doesn't depend on the other kids for friendship, never shares other girls' names or blush about the boys. Soon, she will stop needing me as well. Good thing they don't give out drivers' licenses so young.

There are many things I wish I could tell her. I wish I could be there to stroke her hair when she loses her first love. I wish I could tell her how to pick up the pieces when her heart breaks. There are so many wishes that my heart aches to think these things, to know that I am no role model to teach her how to heal her own wounds. I don't have the words to tell her what I have been through. They turn on themselves and become incoherent before the first sentence is out. She looks directly forward when she walks. Perhaps she will never need my words.

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As on every morning, I get to work just after eight. I turn on the lights and the heat and the coffeemaker. I arrive early enough to drink some coffee, but I have to start another pot, tuck the used filter underneath paper in the trash can, and wash my mug before the associates come in. Only when the bodies start filling the room with their warmth and their breath can I take off my coat and sit down to the files piled on the corner of my desk.

My boss, Mr. Lee, is the last person to show up each morning. I stand behind my desk as he struts in. He's shaped like a prize turkey fattened for the fair. He isn't much more functional than the couple farm animals we had growing up, so I can't help comparing him to livestock. The top of his head is bald, but the hair clinging to its sides resembles a halo of white down. He did all the hard work cajoling local businesses and blackmailing the few Kershaw families with money decades ago. Now, he gets to drown himself in whiskey each night and sleep in his office all day. It's a wonder he's kept me around so long, but I've been here through a few retired partners, the downslide of his gut, and the receding of his hairline. Being here's not much different than staying home with Lorena.

All day I field phone calls and draft letters to clients. At lunch, I walk to the post office and wait in line to send a contract next day. The divorce papers are the worst. I want to write to

these clients, tell them that they are lucky to have someone, even if it's someone they have to argue with every day. By five, my head hurts. I want to disappear into the folds of the jewelry that I make. I would even trade places with the squirrel on the windowsill. I catch a few typos where my thoughts bled into the correspondence, giving people instructions on creating acorn shapes rather than letting them know how to properly file their grievances. I get paper stuck in the printer, tear at the reams and wish that I could go back to using typewriters. Once, Mr. Lee threatened to send me to Europe with his wife. He said I was probably the only person he knew who would be able to keep Mrs. Lee abroad, she would try to outlast me and so defeat herself. I wish he would offer to send me packing again. Sometimes I build up the courage to demand a vacation, but his red face and loud "What now?" as I knock on the door scare the thought right out of me.

The only times I was free was running across my father's fields with my brothers. Sam and John and I escaped homework each afternoon we could. When they were not in school for some activity, we played tag down the rows of corn, sometimes trampled through the neighbors' fields irreverent of the damage we could cause. I was good at hiding because I was so small. The boys' teenage bodies cut trails through stalks and leaves and pine straw. However, I cut across the land like a ghost and hid in the woods until they gave up searching.

"Rosie, where are you? It's almost time for dinner," Sam would yell.

I would come out from behind the pine tree with the split in its middle, the one where we sometimes hid our treasures of feathers and colored stones too beautiful to skip across the pond.

John grabbed me around my waist and spun me high in the air. "Got you. It's not even close to time for dinner."

I hit my fists against his arms. He laughed. I was only a tick trying to irritate a buck.

Sam joined us and picked up my feet.

I screamed as they pretended they would toss me. "I'm gonna tell Momma."

They swung me to the left.

"You won't," John said. "You're not a tattletale."

They swung me to the right. I thought I would be able to fly if they let go, straight up to the quarter moon still glowing in the pale blue daylight. No one could explain why the moon was out though it was day. I focused on it and prayed I would land in the lunar dust softly.

"I could be a tattletale if I wanted to."

"We didn't raise you to be a tattletale," Sam said.

John pretended he was going to let go. My brothers stepped toward each other until my middle sagged into the pine straw. I rolled over onto my feet and dusted off my bottom. I grinned at them, hoping that they would not see how afraid I had been.

Sam put me on his shoulders. When he could, he swatted away the twigs that John broke off and threw at me.

Sam and John were twins. They had dirty blond hair and green eyes. Sam's eyes were the prettiest, though I would have never said that aloud. His eyes were sea foam green while John's had more of Momma's hazel. Though they weren't identical, people were always getting them mixed up anyway. I didn't see how. Sam was good at mechanical things. He loved science and always showed me banana spiders and mimosa seed pods and pointed out Orion when we walked at night. John drew large pictures for me to color in with my crayons. Momma hoped he would go to an art school if he could get a scholarship.

I got annoyed when each of my teachers told me how much I looked like them, but all Pickens look alike, even the married-in ones.

They enlisted when they turned eighteen, when I was in the fifth grade. I didn't know much about politics or the world beyond how far I could run in a day. Grownups liked to talk about patriotism and duty, but they pulled at the ends of their sleeves and shifted from foot to foot when they said so. I could never be sure if what they were saying was absolutely true. Sam and John believed them though.

Time stopped for my parents when we got the letters.

There wasn't much on the page. I could tell from the sunlight shining through it, making all but the black typewritten letters translucent. What little there was made Daddy's jaw slacken and his shoulders slump forward. Momma screamed and ran to her room. Daddy eased down next to me on the couch, the arm of which was wiggly from sitting on it too much. I shook it from side to side. He told me that Sam and John weren't coming home. All I could think was that they would never take me blackberry picking in the summer. I wasn't old enough to realize what had happened. It only added up to a lot of no-mores. No more Sam defending me from John. No more John making silly jokes and pictures. I cried myself to sleep, my mouth twisted as if I had just bitten into a blackberry not ripe enough yet for picking.

I still don't like sending or receiving letters. Occasionally, my fear makes my job difficult. Those times, I count the steps to another braid. Each keystroke is a strand of hair flipped from the first position in a group of four to the third position. All the way around my circular work table until the necklace or ring is braided—there isn't enough hair in the world to make all the jewelry my mind crafted while typing memos and address labels. In a small way, I stop being a mother at the office, and sometimes I hope that the memos will never end.

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Lorena's inside coloring when I return to the elementary school. The other unfortunate kids with working parents crowd around two tables engrossed in board games I don't recognize, which require too many breakable parts. Seems they wouldn't be fun to play after taking all that time to set up, but the trap springs and a blue plastic mouse is caught in a basket.

I kneel next to my daughter. Her brown wavy hair is pulled back into a lopsided ponytail. I take out the pink fuzzy tie and smooth back what I can, twist the tie around her gathered hair, and curl the ends around my index finger. Lorena doesn't look up. She keeps coloring a picture of a tiger she tore from the activity book.

"What's his name?" I say.

"No, Momma, it's a girl."

"Then what's *her* name?"

"Tigers don't have names. They don't speak. They growl."

I grab her backpack and refrain from asking why she's coloring the tiger purple if she's going to be that rational about the tiger's speech capabilities. Lorena comes home reciting facts about everything, talking nonstop about what games she played and what Mrs. Maple, her teacher, taught them. She reminds me of Sam, and I say nothing on the car ride to the grocery store. She recounts a book about caterpillars and their cocoon cycles. Lorena will never know her uncles or her grandparents, will never see a photo of her father or know that he's alive and well with a family of his own halfway across the state. She doesn't ask about Paul. I think she stopped trying when she noticed I never put forward any effort to describe him. I try to remember patterns, one A to one B, two A to two B.

Yet, Lorena does know some things in her own way. As we get out of the car, she puffs up her cheeks and squints her eyes at Mrs. Barnwell, who stares at us whenever we bump into

her. The woman would tell us what's what if it weren't for her *Christian* upbringing. I'd like to stick out my tongue too and tell her a few things about Christian charity, but she's one of Mrs. Lee's good friends. Used to be when I walked into the grocery store, the ladies eyed my growing belly and ring-less left hand. As I placed each item on the belt to be rung up, the cashier glared at me, as if between the milk and the eggs, I somehow managed to slip in a carton of adultery as well, as if sin could be weeded out as an ingredient in a recipe. But I didn't care and was never one to get along with other women anyway. Lorena's the one I worry about. The heckling mostly died away after they saw Lorena and her giant brown eyes and curiosity about everything—but it won't stop, not completely.

One day she'll realize that I'm older than the other kids' mommas. Alone at the table rather than a pair like the other kids' parents. She won't be the only student at school with only one mom, but she will be one of a select few who started with less than the others. What does a parent say to a girl when the make believe ends? How do I keep her trust when I never kept up my end in the first place?

At the grocery store, I pick Lorena up and put her in a buggy. I give her the grocery list. She sounds words out, and I don't correct her when she pronounces *scallions* like the animal. When I reach for oranges rather than apples, she corrects me. I have to turn down her requests for the fun foods, the Lunchables and candy. We get to the checkout lane. I'd thought I'd done the calculations right, but we're a few dollars short. I put back the lemons and the hamburger though I feel the craving for it, like iron rusted on the back of my tongue, stuck with another few weeks of canned tuna. I miss the goat hiding in the corner of Daddy's barn, I miss Momma's meatloaf, I miss the ease of life that was only ever tenuously mine in the first place. Some nights,

I dream about my parents. I wake up smelling the dirt and sweat of Daddy coming indoors for the evening. My mother's rock and roll dance music still tapping in my heels.

I let Lorena carry the bread and place it in the trunk. She does her job dutifully, both hands around the bag's plastic handles, set down gently half on the bumper. I wait until she stands by her door to push the bread back and close the trunk.

#

I make dinner. Lorena and I say nothing, fork piles into our mouths instead. After the dishes are cleared of food and stacked in the dishwasher, we enter my office. She pulls out a basket of dolls, and I choose the weights proper for the braid pattern. Some are round, but the conical ones are more appropriate for earrings. The hairs have to be counted individually, put into sixteen equal groups of sixty. While I count, I must look at what I'm doing, but often I can watch Lorena or look outside while I fold the groups over and under.

Outside, geese are flying low, finding shelter for the night on the ponds hidden behind the line of the tall yellow pines. Watching the birds land for the evening reminds me of Paul. Like Daddy and Momma and Sam and John, I see him too, all too clearly. That first day, I smoothed the skirt of my old Sunday dress. I'd patched the zipper from where it'd pulled from years of use. It was the only nice dress I owned back then, but I have a few more now. We met at the country club, a get-together for one of Mr. Lee's clients, most likely Paul, but I forget now. Mr. Lee kept having me fetch him whiskey neat from the kitchen, even though he was paying for wait staff. Mrs. Lee raised an eyebrow each time I returned with a full glass. I was hardly the type of woman to go lusting after men at all, least of all one as balding and rude as Mr. Lee.

His fifth drink slid sweaty and full into his palms.

Mr. Lee grabbed my wrist to keep me from turning away. “Rose, there’s someone I’d like you to meet. Paul, this is my Rose. Couldn’t keep the place running without her. She will remember your drink order too, if you want.”

I raised my eyes to Paul’s. The thought hadn’t occurred to me that the center of my existence was the farm, but in an instant it had shifted from the land to this man. I turned my gaze aside to Mr. Lee, who was staring at a wall, his weight tipped backwards on his heels. Now, I could feed him water and he’d never notice until he’d sobered up too much.

Paul stuck out a hand. I shook it once, and we dropped our arms to our sides. You could tell he was married, the thin band of pale skin on his finger that would never go away, the stiff way he said hello to the other women, a whole new breed of person he’d just realized existed and didn’t know what to do with.

“Are you an attorney too?” I asked.

“Real estate, among other things.”

Mr. Lee laughed his usual gruff, throat-clearing noise, an indication there would be trouble if I looked too far into his friend’s professional matters. Probably tax evasion or botched bookkeeping that Mr. Lee advised.

“Where are you from?”

“Columbia.”

Paul shifted his feet. I didn’t know where else to take the conversation without insulting my boss or his guest, so I excused myself on the pretense of getting more whiskey for Mr. Lee. I escaped to the back porch. The country club deck overlooked a small pond. Canadian geese and wood ducks settled on the water for the evening, flapping their wings before hitting the surface. Even from a distance, I admired the spread of their plumage, their wingspans then tucked neatly

against their breasts. My brothers used to shoot ducks sometimes when they'd sneak on one of the neighboring farms. They would've better appreciated Mr. Lee's drunkenness than I could, all of the silly to-do about these events.

"Do you need a jacket?"

Paul stood in the doorway behind me. He switched his glass from hand to hand as he walked onto the balcony.

"I'm fine, thank you," I said.

I looked back over the water because if I looked at Paul, something in my stomach ached. To keep from imagining grabbing his hand, I watched the three-quarter moon, its dark mares where I wanted to live as a child. Little gravity, no buildings or laws or dresses to contain me. I'd used to watch black and white Martian movies with my daddy. I wonder how that imagination got away from me.

"Those birds are doves." He pointed to black swift dots closing in on the magnolias. "If you're quiet enough, you can hear their wings flapping as they land. It will sound almost like a whistle."

I couldn't be sure what I was hearing wasn't the scratching of silverware against plates in the room behind us or the birds in front of us.

Mr. Lee cleared his throat behind us. "I was wondering where you'd gone with my drinks."

I sidled away from the banister behind my boss.

"It's my fault," Paul said. "I wanted someone to talk to, and, since your wife would say no more, I had to steal your secretary."

Mr. Lee tottered and grabbed at the doorframe for support. “She’s yours. You just have to foot the bill if it’s on company time.”

I blushed and lowered my head. My fists clenched, and I wished that I could hit him, but bill money would be impossible to come by if I acted on my desires.

Paul looked between the two of us. I reentered the party, not caring for once if they saw me upset. The people would talk no matter, but I didn’t want Paul to hear how quiet my voice could get, to see the square of my jaw hardened by clenched teeth.

Sometimes I worry that he was a ghost and I made it all up in my mind. Then I remember carrying Lorena for nine months, her kick, the feel of our pulse, the taut skin of my belly, and, even though the adultery shames me, I’m thankful for my daughter. When I lost my physical connection to Lorena, I felt something pass from me, the last remaining shards of courage it took to carry her. Sam, John, Lorena, they are fine. I wasn’t ever like them. I hope perhaps what little remaining hope there was left in my heart was given to her. Lorena should be strong, learn like I never did that heartbreak helps you appreciate the small things so much more, it makes the smallest physical pains sharper and more keenly felt. The braids, the patterns, the names, they all dull my senses, but she should remain pointed, keen on her hopes and desires.

I named Lorena for my great-grandmother, whom I never met. When Momma sat on my bed and guided me by my shoulders to the floor in front of her, the brush poised just above the crown of my head as she thought of what story to tell first, I always asked for tales about the old Lorena. Momma would talk about her grandma who lost most of her male kin to the war, who’d plow fields alongside her husband, who could outshoot her brothers and uncles—what was left of them anyway. She taught my mother to make biscuits and to repurpose clothes and to dance when there was music to be had, because you never knew when it would play next. I never did

ask my mother to share her stories of the Depression or the War. We weren't taught to ask, just to listen.

Lorena plays with her dolls on the floor while I finish my earrings. Sometimes, she asks to sit in my lap while I work, but I push her outstretched arms away from the worktable where she could knock the weights out of order. I pull the strands around the table, three over two, three over four. My thoughts are too constant and this is the only way they recede into the background. One over two. Three over two. A to C. My life is somewhat like that, the losses spinning in various orders. Momma, Daddy, Sam, John, Paul. I wish my brain was a faucet, with knobs so that thoughts could be turned off at will. A knob to get rid of the constant firings inside me. Sam, Momma, Paul, John, Daddy.

I'm making a pair of ball-shaped earrings to wear with a new dress when I have enough time to travel to see my friends. My pieces of jewelry to sell are stacking up and there are some orders from volunteers at the plantations around the state. Women always like to be beautiful, and my jewelry is better than ribbons. Lorena fidgets too much when I volunteer or drive to reenactments, but those are the few times, when the patterns drown out my memories, when the cannons are so loud there's no use in talking, when I can be happy.

When I am done with the pattern, I take Lorena for her bath. While I adjust the temperature and stopper the tub, she undresses and folds her pants and t-shirt into a pile on the sink. She plays with a cup and plastic fast-food toys we've accumulated. I set down the lid of the toilet seat and cradle my head in my hands. The splashes darken the rug where they slosh over the lip of the tub. I don't get a towel. I'll remember to hang the rug later when she has gone to bed. Her toys crash together. They have fantastical names like Hoggle and Frizzle. I ask her to sing her ABCs and she repeats the song until her toes and palms wrinkle. I towel her off, slip her

pajama dress over her head. I try to get the brush, but she yells and runs away. I set it down again on the counter.

Finally, Lorena's yawns grow closer together. I carry her to her bedroom, fold down the sheets, and lay her on sheets bright blue as the sky in April. She is asleep before I can pull the comforter over her small body. From the hallway closet, I grab a blanket, then I sit in the rocker on the front porch. The first of the hard freezes will be here soon, but, for now, the days are still golden and warm, the light the color of goldenrod in untended meadows. I want to run out there, to see if my brothers are somewhere by the old pond or in the trees where we'd constructed forts with leaning platforms and loose ladder rungs. I stare up at the stars above me. Everyone is up there, but I will only ever reach the moon. I feel more like a reflection of a star than an actual one, a projection of a real thing, sunlight enabling us to see our moon, but she has no shine of her own.

Not for the first time in my life, I wish that there was someone I could depend on, someone I could leave all of this to. I imagine buying a plane ticket to China or South Africa, places so different from South Carolina that living there would feel like a dream and I'd never have to wake up. What is there to hold me back? People talk all the time about giving children better lives. Lorena cries. Another nightmare, I'm sure. I look away from the moon, blink my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and walk back indoors.

TIDAL MOTION

Iris hated football games about as much as she did living in the Upstate, but her sorority considered it poor form for students not to freeload off their parents or complete strangers. The music was too loud, the food too greasy, and the fans too obnoxious after one too many beers under the Carolina sun. Fall semesters revolved around the games, and the majority of Greek social life happened on these Saturdays. Iris hated football games, and considered dropping out of college so she wouldn't have anything more to do with the games or the rest of this town.

Her sorority's tailgating spot was just shy of the stadium's shadow. The asphalt was coated with red clay dirt washed up during rainstorms and tracked in by trucks fresh from the country. The girls arranged the food on a fold-out table and chilled beers in a cooler while men set up canopy tents. Iris helped herself to a burger and potato salad and sat in the pickup cab under the far corner of the tent, determined to stay put until the game started and she could go downtown, obligation to purgatory over. The crowd formed an ocean of variations on the same two hues of the opposing teams. Iris counted baseball caps and wide-brimmed hats, beaded belts and long necklaces and Mardi Gras-type beads. People tossed footballs and ping pong balls and bean bags and baseballs. Smells of charcoal, hot dogs, and coleslaw drifted up from grills and tables. Waves of heat rippled off the far end of the pavement. The occasional breeze only reminded Iris how sweaty she was. She wanted her acrylics and a paintbrush and a quiet room in the basement of the Visual Arts building where she could put this life to canvas. Lately, she'd had no inspiration to paint and she searched out details for interesting subjects but remained uninspired.

Beyond the canopies, a stranger traded high fives with the guys. Someone handed him a horseshoe, which he landed around the post. No matter who he was, he belonged to the frats now. He stood out, not only by his tall lanky frame, but by his polished dress shoes and black slacks. He looked like he'd watched one too many bad Crispin Glover movies and admired the dark, beaky style of the actor.

"Who's that?" Iris pointed with the neck of her Coors at the man. He seemed like he didn't belong, just the type of person who would understand her.

"Charles," her best friend, Rebecca, replied. "I heard he works in Atlanta."

"Did he go here? He doesn't dress like he did."

"Maybe." Rebecca turned toward Iris, her back toward Charles. Rebecca didn't realize that her subtlety was everything but. "He shows up from time to time. He creeps me out."

Iris bit her lip and stared at Charles until the blood in her cheeks burned and she had to look away. Watching him felt like visiting the insect and reptile displays at the zoo—she couldn't trust the invisible glass pane to hold back the tarantula if it really wanted to jump on her. Charles looked in her direction. They made eye contact, then Iris studied the pile of cans on the ground and nodded at whatever Rebecca was saying. When she looked up, Charles was parting through the crowd toward her.

Charles leaned beside her on the door of the truck. "So you're Iris. They told me I'd missed your sack toss skills last time I was in town." His speech was even and delivered in measured syllables as formal as his appearance.

Iris stuck out her hand. She had the feeling that he already knew who she was right down to her shoe size. "I only play when they force me."

"Fair enough. Going to the game?"

“No,” she said, even though she had a ticket in her purse. Rebecca muttered something and rolled her eyes.

“Not a big sports fan?” Charles asked.

“Only baseball.”

“At least it’s something.”

Iris threw her plate away. She opened another beer bottle and took a sip. She might have enjoyed herself more if the day didn’t promise dehydration within half an hour. Though the forecast called for heavy rain that evening, the clouds were taking their time getting to the stadium. The tide of fans moved faster toward the hulking gray structure of the stadium.

“Take my ticket,” Iris said to Rebecca.

“You promised this time you’d stay for the whole thing.”

“Go inside already and have fun. I’ll find something to do.”

“Call me when you need a ride home.” Rebecca joined her fiancé and the group of students collecting on the other side of the street from their tents.

“What do you do while they’re inside?” Charles asked.

Charles sat with a hand on either side of his legs, head bent toward her. Iris was left with a couple acquaintances. And Charles. Iris dragged the toe of her boot around the gravel. He didn’t move. He didn’t fidget with his jacket or swing his legs. All he did was stare at her. He looked at her as if he could see every thought passing through her mind, as if her skin were crocheted lace, full of holes.

Iris took a drink from her beer, then two. “Sometimes we bring a TV and watch the game here. Otherwise, we go to a bar downtown and kill time.”

“Want to kill time? I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Sure.”

Iris stood and brushed off the back of her dress. By the time she'd found her purse, Charles had walked to the other side of the parking lot. Iris ran to catch up, then took two steps for his every one. The way her boots rubbed the balls of her feet told her she would pay for this sprint later, but a sense of adventure eased the pain with a giddy sort of wariness.

Someone like Charles, fresh out of Atlanta, must have laughed at the city's limited nightlife. Downtown—really the bottom of hills in all four directions in the oldest part of town—consisted of two-storied buildings mismatched in color and construction material. Many of the original structures stood, modified for plumbing and then only for repairs. All the bars ended up in this basin, like run-off waste that wouldn't cling to the historic homes and corporate towers. Iris didn't wear dress shoes when drinking there, afraid she'd track some of the poison back into her dorm room where it could suffocate her as she slept.

The first few bars were packed to the doors. Bouncers sat on stools controlling the flow of college kids and out-of-towners. Charles looked past the lines and the buildings toward where the streets started to climb upward again. He stopped in front of a squat, slim building, the Pandemonium, which consisted of two rooms—the front bar and the kitchen—as well as two bathrooms built as afterthoughts. Iris had been only once before, on a blind date that had soured before second drinks were ordered. She didn't like it. Not the smell like stale vomit, not the dark lighting that hardly cut through the smoke. A few red neon lights cast a glow on the tables and faces around the room.

Charles chose a table in the middle. Iris sat across from him with the intention of seeing him straight on. The table was sticky, needed wiping down. A power washer might have been the only tool able to cut through the grime. The solitary bartender poured drinks behind a counter

smashed against one wall, hardly any room behind him to store bottles or glasses. He walked to the kitchen to retrieve and return dishes as the other customers placed orders. A few kitchen staff brought out baskets of wings or fries. No one returned Iris's smiles.

Charles approached the bartender and returned with six shots of whiskey and a beer for Iris. He took a drink in each hand, cradled Iris's as he set it down in front of her. She cupped the shot glass. The liquid was the tint of amber she would have used in a painting of a fishing boat trolling for its last autumn catch. Charles swallowed his shot with no reaction—no grimace, no shaking from the raw burn of the alcohol, not even a smile from surviving the gut rot. Iris sipped until she felt she'd never taste anything again. Sandpaper would have pleased her throat more.

"Are you from Georgia?"

He passed her another round. "I'm from a lot of places. Traveled around as a kid, like a military brat but for my dad's business."

"Where was your favorite place?"

"No favorite. People are people everywhere."

Charles glanced around the room, studying objects for so long that Iris had to fight the urge to turn and stare too. She'd expect such an overtly rhetorical answer more from a boy trying to impress her than from someone who seemed bored. Iris fidgeted, pulled at the label on her bottle, and brushed her hair behind her ears. He sat still and tall.

"What was your major?" she asked.

"Business."

"Family tradition." She smiled.

"It was for the money, not my father. Have another." He passed her a shot glass.

She tried to drink it in one gulp. She coughed. “So why study business at all? It is possible to make money doing something you like.”

Charles clucked his tongue behind his teeth. “It’s really not important. You’re much more interesting, Iris.” He was red, redder than the neon lights. The glow seemed to come from his skin. She tried to recall the names of the pigments she would use to commit his image to paper, but the names slid out of her mind, now a boat with a hole she couldn’t stopper.

“What do you study?” he asked.

Iris had to consciously move her head forward to face Charles. “Visual art. Mostly painting, but I take photos too.”

“Whose work do you think yours is most like?”

They finished the whiskey, and he held up two fingers toward the bartender. The game was only in the second quarter, and already Iris wished she’d shown better judgment than leaving Rebecca. The atmosphere of stale beer and sweat made her stomach clench. She felt the whiskey worming its way through her stomach and bloodstream. The clockwork exchange of cheers and jeering made answering difficult. She rolled her shoulders back, then forward when the tension remained, and released a long breath out. Talking to Charles felt more like a job interview than a date.

“You don’t like bars much, do you?” he asked.

“How could you tell?”

“It took a while for you to decide on your beer at the tailgate. I haven’t met an alcoholic so indecisive. And you keep looking around like a bird searching for a way to escape.”

“I would like to escape. This place at least.”

“Everyone else seems to love it. Hell, I have to come back every few months.”

“It’s not the same as living here.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “It’s dirtier than back home in St. Clair. Have you ever been there? This time a year they decorate all the carriages with fall leaves and do a harvest festival for all the school kids. They used to have me paint faces, even though the kids would sweat and mess up all the colors. And all they wanted were footballs and ponies, not even the hard things to draw.”

Charles leaned his elbows on the table, his fingers laced together. He kept getting bigger and bigger in her vision. “I hate this state. I was so glad when my dad moved.”

Iris lost count of how many drinks she’d had. The room felt compact, as if she could reach in any direction and touch the walls. She set her bottle down and pushed it toward him. “I really think I should get back to Rebecca. She’s probably tried to call.”

A cheer went up around the room. One man nearly knocked Iris out of her chair as he jumped around their table to get to the bar, his arms raised in a victorious pose. People yelled across the small space, thrust drinks in the air, and made the room spin faster.

Iris said, “I should get some water.”

“Is Rebecca or water your excuse?” The tone of his voice, like every key on a piano crashed down on at once, gave her goosebumps.

She wanted to leave the entire city, so she started with this room. She leaned against the bathroom wall and pulled out her cell phone. It wasn’t receiving a signal. She washed her hands and face and paced her breathing to ease the dizziness.

As she reentered the room, the noise of the TV cut off and was replaced by the beeping of a weather warning. Iris leaned against the bar and tried to read the tiny white letters scrolling

across the red background. She swallowed back nausea. The announcer cautioned approaching high winds and rain. Thunder erupted over downtown. The clock in the corner of the screen read four in the afternoon. They had been in the bar for an hour.

Charles was not at their table. Iris sat back down. She didn't count on Charles returning, not that he would get far until the storm died down. Rain fell on the rooftop, an entire stage filled with drums beat to different tempos.

The cooks shouted, their words unintelligible beyond "water." Swept up in the fury from an interrupted game, the crowd rushed to the kitchen and blocked her view. She stood on top of the table to see above the mass of arms and torsos. Everyone—herself included—was too shocked or drunk to care.

A pool of water collected near the back door. The staff hustled around the bar faster than they had before, smiles deflated as they unplugged refrigerators and TVs. The red lights were killed one at a time, and the room became gloomier, the gray-brown of faded wood. A low murmur spread as the crowd rotated, a few people poking heads into the kitchen then allowing the next handful to come forward. The view out the front door was even less reassuring. Black clouds and water falling in a one thick block made visibility even to the other side of the road difficult. The couple who left were lost to sight.

As the kitchen doorway cleared, the rising water showed through gaps between legs and then flowed into the bar area. In only half an hour, the level was ankle-deep where the floor sagged. The edges of the bar glistened, with the threat that the walls could not hold back the tide. Iris wanted to wipe at her eyes, as if drunkenness had settled around the periphery of her vision, as if the water was a prank pulled on her like the pipes and the label on the floor. Yet the water didn't go away.

The signal on the TV went out. The ever-present connection to the rest of the world was gone. There was a strange, silent peace to watching her world drown in this slow way, as if it could be wiped clean in a single moment.

One man stood at the center of a loosely formed group. He raised his arm, a drunken pantomime of a shepherd. “Come with us if you’re leaving,” he said.

A couple people stayed toward the edge of the bar. Students huddled close together. As the crowd thinned around the outside, Iris saw Charles walking toward her.

“Can you believe that guy?” he asked.

“Where did you go?”

“Upstairs. Don’t listen to this guy. The water is going everywhere. It doesn’t look safe.” He held out his hand.

Iris looked down at him, then crouched to get off the table. The flood would ruin her boots, but that wasn’t a terrible consequence to get away from the noise of people waiting for their decisions to be made for them. Water splashed into her boots until they filled. As she moved, she was thankful that the boots had been too tight, that they wouldn’t be sucked away in the current.

“I feel safer going with them,” she said.

Charles shrugged.

The lights flickered. Water lapped at her knees. More than an hour had passed, but Iris couldn’t tell through the shouting, the attempts to organize this chaos into something they could understand. Budweiser cans and sporks floated around the room. The flooding was not cold. The deepest waters ebbed, but weakly, more as if the water knew that it was supposed to be elsewhere but hadn’t settled on a direction to get there yet.

As the group waded outside, her visibility increased, but only minimally. Rain was down her legs and in her bra and across the street and plastered to the man's head next to her. All the trees and buildings were sodden and dark. Stop signs and tree limbs were knocked down or leaning. Iris had spent more hours than she'd realized downtown, after class and with her sorority sisters. That world was half covered, recognizable only if she didn't look too hard, if she didn't try to make out familiar doorframes or window displays. Now she searched the upper stories and rooftops for direction. Was the hardware store the red slanted roof or the tan square one?

The de facto leader of the group stood at the side of the huddle.

"We should head up."

Iris rolled her eyes. A two year old could have said that, provided he or she was tall enough to stand above the waist-high water.

One girl pointed in the direction of her house and the group trudged forward. Iris shuffled, wary of stepping on nails or broken glass made invisible by the dark brown water. Footholds gave way where sidewalks ended or over potholes. Another girl stepped into a fire hydrant covered with half a foot to spare. The downpour reminded her of summers at Lake Wateree or Lake Murray on her dad's pontoon boat, jumping into the dark green water and trying to grab weeds if they'd cut the engine in the shallows. Dirt had clung to the hair on her arms and stomach, both fascinating and disgusting her.

An old man was stranded atop his Toyota, water visible through its windows. A woman leaned out a second-story window and shouted to the students in the bar across the street. One man, who must have lived in a house nearby, trolled in a small jon boat. A willowy boy paddled a three-foot-long white cooler as a makeshift kayak, his knees poking above its sides, a yield sign

as his paddle in one hand, bailing out with a jug in the other. Some students splashed and laughed, but the greater part of the people grimaced. Iris hoped any creaking she heard was not building structures. She never imagined this happening in a city, though, far from riverbanks, out of reach of coastal floodplains or hurricanes. Garbage floated all over into doorways and gathered at the edge of this new lake. Men and women staggered and leaned against one another. Shoulders slumped, hair fell limp, dresses and shorts and jeans were torn from lurking objects.

At the base of the hill, Iris thought she saw Charles through the rain. He stood on the opposite hill staring in at the damage. He raised an arm. Iris didn't wave back. The way he'd disappeared and didn't care about what happened to the others in the bar, he could have been splashing along with the other college students. They weren't adding up property damage and insurance claims with each new gallon. He was an outsider, but Iris wasn't.

No, he could save himself.

As doors were opened, merchandise and equipment escaped. Items floated or bumped Iris's toes as she waded forward. She filled her purse with scraps, all hard and plastic. Paper fell apart and hollow objects pulled under with the current before she could reach them. Her boot knocked against something, and she reached into the water. She came up with a package of palette knives. The wooden handles were swollen, and the label had disintegrated to nothing more than a few strips of glue.

They walked up King Street, the neighborhood stretching north out of the city. The water sucked at her dress and at her boots each step upward. Then they were at the edge and stepping onto sodden grass. Out of the tide, she walked into a stranger's yard, putting aside all propriety, and sat in the dirt. They would forgive her. It wasn't every day that the city flooded. She leaned against a tree, the leaves shielding from some of the force of the pounding rain.

She wanted to be in the sorority house, girls running down the hallways, sisters constantly there to hear her complaints and to praise her new portraits. She'd signed up to live there for her mother and hadn't expected it to be so normal. She wanted her twin bed and her pillows and candles burning the scent of gardenias. Her bedspread was a royal purple. A golden scarf draped over the vanity mirror hid the nicks. The posters and photos on the walls were by Brassai, Botticelli, and Monet, positioned between shards of photo frames and glass, a kaleidoscopic collage. The other girls called her room an art major's heaven, but that didn't stop them from sitting on her ottoman or asking for decoration ideas. She missed their voices and the mix of their perfume, and she regretted ever telling Charles that she hated her new life.

Iris thought about her latest prints for her photography class. She had focused on fountains, and traveled campus and downtown for manmade fountains and impromptu ones, busted fire hydrants and drinking fountains. She was just beginning to see objects from a different perspective, to look at them individually and not as a part of the urban backdrop. Iris had grown up in a suburb with nearby movie theaters and Chinese take-out and could not tell the difference between kudzu and yellow jessamine. Her rarefied knowledge was of shopping mall parking lots and cable television.

The owner of the house came outside with towels and coffee. Iris wrapped herself up and took the warm drink. Exhausted and dehydrated, she'd need at least two meals at the cafeteria and five showers to remove the muck from her body.

When the flooding receded, most of their group chose to stay. A line formed to use the reconnected telephone lines. Cars pulled up and drove away with sopping friends. Iris didn't know their names, and they probably wouldn't recognize each other if they met again, only some nagging sense of recognition not strong enough to make them stop and ask *Were you there, that*

time when. Iris decided to follow their leader with two others to survey the damage. As each branched off, they shook hands and nodded, then disappeared to pull shoes from storm drains or return chairs to rightful patios.

Shop owners stared at their storefronts. Cameras and cell phones collected pictures of the damage. The owner of Iris's favorite boutique kneeled on the sidewalk.

Iris put a hand on her shoulder. "Is there anything I could do?"

The woman smiled. She pointed out the racks of clothes that needed to be thrown away. From upstairs, she produced pens and paper. Before each trip to the dumpster, the amount of items and the barcode numbers had to be noted. Iris guessed where the damp had erased a digit. When the first floor was emptied, Iris joined another crew clearing mud and paper scraps from fountains and drowned bushes. Iris found another person in need each time she completed a task. Muddy streaks covered her arms. Her legs were brown instead of their usual cream-like shade. She wasn't sure what her hair and face looked like, but she didn't care. Instead, she focused on the ache in her arms and her back, the signs of pumping muscles and hard work.

A horn honked behind Iris. She jumped and turned around. Rebecca and her fiancé pulled up next to her. Iris looked up at the dark sky. She had not thought about the passing time much as neighbors illuminate the cleanup by their car and truck headlights.

"Where the hell were you? We looked everywhere. Get in."

Rebecca scooted over and wrapped an arm around Iris.

"Where's Charles? I thought you left with him."

"He wasn't worth a second date. Let's just go home." Iris leaned her head against the window and didn't say a word the rest of the car ride.

After Rebecca left her at her bedroom door, Iris showered and sat on her bed in pajamas. Later, she would organize cleanup efforts, later she would create committees and posters and awareness, but for now she drew her knees to her chest. When she felt she could move again without too much aching, she took the palette knives from her purse. All the other objects she dumped into a bin near her desk to dry, for use in some class project or other. She pulled each knife from the package and wiped the water spots from its surface. Only two had cracks in the wood and the neck of one was slightly bent. From her desk, she pulled out her sketchbook and black paint.

THE BAIRSTOW HOUSE

As Lorena pulled her car up the long driveway of packed brown dirt, she laughed at her sad memories of the House. She'd come here to bury her mother who hadn't wanted a funeral. This plantation was the place Rosamond had loved best, and it was nothing like Lorena remembered. Instead, the colors of late summer showed in dark green waxy leaves and deep yellow and pink flowerbeds. Someone had planted lilies along the front porch, and they bloomed skyward, not hunkered down by the heat and humidity. Lorena couldn't believe how small the plantation felt, how near to town it was, how quickly the car raced down the driveway. The bushes didn't raise level with her chest anymore. The gulf between each porch step was scaled down to mere inches. She no longer saw the columns as sprawling, but simple wooden posts of strong and sensible support. Even her car—which she'd had for two years—felt smaller, constraining.

Lorena locked the car, then walked up the porch steps of the Bairstow House without hesitating. Rocking chairs were set up around a table stacked with games, probably for any kids whose parents liked to drag them to museums. The chairs were new, and the steps had been rebuilt and painted—the third stair didn't creak, which Lorena used to have to jump over to avoid drawing her mother's attention. She pushed the door that stood cracked open even in the heat. Fans blew in every room, but they made little difference without air conditioning. The preservationists couldn't install AC because it would require too much work on the original structure.

The desk with the visitor log and cash register was still in the foyer. The laptop open on the desk was new. Maybe this was the source of the new website and marketing Lorena had discovered when she looked to see if opening hours had changed.

Lorena studied the new photographs on the wall while she waited for someone to notice she was there. The left side of the hallway showcased original portraits of the family who'd provided the House with its namesake, a few generations captured on film until the grounds had been given up to the state in the Thirties. The family had emigrated from England and built the estate with the fortune it'd amassed before the American Revolution. Hand-drawn maps of the property hung next to soldiers' portraits and images of Reconstruction. It had taken Lorena's mother and her mother's coworkers much time to track down these documents. The second set of pictures on the right focused on the preservation efforts. Her mother stood in a few of these, hands clenched in front of her, mouth and eyes drawn down in a solemn imitation of original Civil War photos.

A new one of her mother was placed at the end of the display. Rosamond stood in her evening gown, the pale rose one she'd spent days making to commemorate some War event or another. Lorena wished she'd paid more attention to what her mother had told her, all those nights they sat in the living room. Her mother had sat in the recliner stitching the decorative hem while Lorena stretched out on the floor trying to memorize geometry proofs over the sound of her mother's voice.

Footsteps came out of the dining room and out into the foyer behind Lorena. "Can I help you?" a familiar voice asked.

"Just who I was looking for," Lorena said.

Mrs. Netherwood, a graying squat woman with red cheeks and a warm smile, had been the closest thing her mother had had to a friend—though Lorena wasn't sure that their work companionship equated real friendship. They'd worked together ever since Lorena's mother gave up her day job as a secretary to pursue her love of old houses and swords and heirlooms, right up until her stroke two years ago. Mrs. Netherwood had sometimes fed Lorena when Rosamond had forgotten to buy groceries again. Now, Lorena understood how much her father's abandonment had taken a toll on her mother. Now, her mother was only a collection of photographs and dresses, and a glass urn strapped by the seatbelt to the passenger seat of her car.

Mrs. Netherwood looked Lorena up and down for a second before she recognized her. "Well, Lorena came back all the way from the coast to see us. How're you doing? Going to be too shy for a hug this time?"

Lorena embraced the elderly woman, whose hearty patting nearly knocked the wind out of her.

"I came by to get the grand tour. Want to see what's changed."

"Not enough, but we're making it." She released Lorena from the hug, but held her at arm's length, twisting her and studying her as if she were an artifact to be analyzed and placed in the collection of the House.

Lorena pulled her wallet from her purse.

"Nonsense. You know you never have to pay."

"It's all right." Lorena said. "In this economy, you need all the help you can get."

"And then some," Mrs. Netherwood added. She set down the bundle she carried, but Lorena did not care to ask what it was, even though it'd probably be the polite way of starting the catching-up dialog.

Lorena counted bills and pulled them out of the wallet. Mrs. Netherwood punched the buttons on the register. The printer spat out a receipt loudly, and the cash drawer rang as it was pushed closed. As long as the system worked, the staff wouldn't ever replace it. Lorena counted seven on her fingertips for each of the years she had been gone, to college and as a teacher now into the final years of her Ph.D. This register had been on that desk longer even than her mother had worked here.

Mrs. Netherwood handed Lorena a brochure. "Look what our new volunteer made. They come from the university, so we get some windfall from their internships."

The pages were glossy and design-heavy. Lorena didn't point out the misspelling on the second page—Mrs. Netherwood's blushing was too proud to deflate.

Lorena recognized that smile, the same one her mother used to wear as she carried reenactment dresses in garment bags to the car, so thick from flounces that they'd take up the whole back seat. The House made Lorena's skin shrink up with goose bumps—it felt as if even her skin was so afraid that the goose bumps wanted to gather together at the back of her skull, leaving her skeleton and organs vulnerable to attack from angry Revolutionary ghosts. On the weekends she'd been stuck playing on the grounds, Lorena always dared herself to climb the hidden staircase to nowhere, but turned back before she could reach the doorknob. If she ever got in that dark, cramped space, she imagined some spirit would steal her soul away. As soon as Lorena had become old enough to stay at home by herself, her mother worked at the House and facilitated special events without her.

#

Growing up, Lorena knew it as the House. Everyone else referred to it by its full name, The Bairstow House, out of reverence. Lorena's classmates wondered what the grown ups

wanted to do with such an old house that smelled like the overcooked collards the lunch lady piled on their trays. They also knew that her mother worked for the House.

Each spring, the local fair took place on its acres of lawn, the House thrown open to visitors for free. Her teachers would pack all the students onto buses and would spend the day reciting history lessons that Lorena had memorized from her mother's obsession. The last time she suffered one of these field trips was in the fifth grade. All of the kids exited the bus and formed a line. As usual, they would rotate to different stations, the same field trip from the previous year and every one before that.

When her teacher wasn't looking, Lorena ran toward the forest just beyond the sight of the House with the sense of entitlement that came from being the daughter of one of its caretakers. She hid behind a tree and, after catching her breath, she peeked around it to make sure she hadn't been followed. She walked for a while, to the tree whose trunk split in two, to the tree with the hole where she kept a collection of buttons and glass and a necklace, which she'd picked up in town and at school. Occasionally, she would sneak to the edge of the lawn where she could make out her schoolmates playing on the porch but where they could not see her.

When she was staring at her reflection in the creek, she heard something behind her. She turned around and saw two fifth-grade boys. One was Dale and one was Lee, but it didn't matter which was which because they dressed and spoke and acted exactly alike.

"We knew we'd find you," Dale (or Lee) said.

"How'd you make it all the way out here? You're going to get lunch detention," Lee said.

Lorena shoved one of her treasures in her back pocket where they wouldn't find it. "You can't tell on me cause then you'd get detention yourself."

"She's right. Guess we have to do something else."

They ran at her and picked her up. She tried to scream, but her lungs would not fill with air. Each time she kicked, she got dizzy until she couldn't fight back. The boys threw her in the creek then ran up the hillside.

Lorena sat in the water until she knew she wouldn't cry anymore. She wiped the mud from her socks and from her back where it'd touched the bottom. Back on ground, she reached in her pocket, but the treasure was gone. She left a trail of mud and water all the way back to the House. Her mother took one look at her and pointed to the porch.

"Go wait for me there. I'll let your teacher know you won't be going back to school with the others."

Lorena nodded and sat on the back steps of the house. She watched the third-graders play tag and the fourth-graders further away stare into a hole where archaeologists were hoping to find the remains of old slave quarters. Her clothes dried stiff and her hair stuck to her forehead and neck. She pretended she was one of the birds in the sky as her class passed her on the way back to the buses. Before, she hadn't known what humiliation was. This was her first memory of hating the Bairstows and everything they'd touched.

#

Lorena pulled herself away from the photographs again, and Mrs. Netherwood came out from behind the desk to begin the tour. They went through the dining room and study on the first story. Lorena appreciated the small details in the servingware and the book collection inside the bureau. Some historic homes and museums tried to match antiques from one time period, but her mother had been more interested in preserving regional flavor rather than chronology—none of the house's goods came from outside the Carolinas.

Many of the handwritten information cards from her childhood had been replaced with typed, printed, and laminated cards. Mrs. Netherwood had her script well memorized and only mentioned one battle year incorrectly, an oversight from age more than likely. They had the house to themselves and talked freely about the objects in each room, their acquisition, and the ongoing tasks of preservation. They paid no mind to the unlocked doors and the unguarded possessions. This far into the country, no one bothered with a decaying house and artifacts that would earn a pittance at auctions.

The upstairs was harder for Lorena to face without her mother to hold her hand. She and Mrs. Netherwood walked the circle created by the upstairs sitting rooms and bedrooms. Lorena enjoyed hearing about the acquisition of new items and the reproduction of clothes and blankets by grandmothers who had learned from their grandmothers. Though she thought she should be sad about never learning to make hair jewelry from her mother, she felt her mother's sort of Victorian veneration of nostalgia and death was better left to books and museums. Instead, she imagined some volunteer diligently typing up these notes on her laptop, sitting in the bright sunshine pouring through the windows as tall as two men. It was harder to grieve than to be in awe of the beauty of a home so well-built that it could stand hundreds of years later for other people to enjoy.

And yet, as they completed more of the circle, Lorena's nervousness grew, as if a wedge were lodged into her spinal cord and her bottom half had fallen away. The tours always ended on the unfinished staircase. Mrs. Netherwood turned back onto the upstairs landing. The matching closet doors on either side of the room were built to fool invaders. The door on the left was truly a pantry with preserves and cobwebs in corners. The one on the right was the surprise. Mrs. Netherwood speculated about runaway slaves or Revolutionary militia and closed her hand

around the right door's knob. The closet was dusty and slanted with shadows. The secret stairs almost looked like shelves, and on first glance, visitors wouldn't know the difference. The stairs began to the left of the top shelf and climbed upward into the space between the walls. The top of the staircase was lost in the darkness, enclosed on three sides, leading to a wooden wall. Historians would never know the truth about the staircase. Perhaps that's what made Lorena so afraid, even all these years later: the knowledge that would never be recovered about these steps. They would always remain a mystery her imagination could run away with.

Not for the first time over the past few days, Lorena wished she had had better judgment growing up. She wished she would have realized how much she and her mother had in common. There was no taking back their estrangement now. She wanted to rationalize it, say that the House had been the wedge between them, but her family's strain of stubbornness was more to blame than an inanimate place. Lorena placed her hand on the doorframe of the cupboard.

#

After that day by the creek, Lorena's classmates increased their teasing, became bolder at school by calling her names in the hallways and passing her mean-spirited notes at lunch. No matter what she did, she couldn't figure out how to please them again, how to become a part of the group again. She imagined that if only she'd had a normal life, that the kids wouldn't dislike her so much. Her mother's affair—which Lorena had to piece together herself from Rosamond's vague comments and the gossip she overheard from parents at other kids' houses—was just the start to alienating the Pickens from the Kershaw community.

Then the phone calls started, then the pushing into lockers, then the name calling during gym and at recess. Lorena's mother dealt with these problems the way she'd approached

everything, by not acting at all. Lorena stopped confiding in her mother after the worst of the calls.

Lorena's mother pulled her car up in front of the middle school. They watched as all of the doors of minivans and family four-doors opened and children poured onto the long stretch of sidewalk.

"Will you be all right today?"

Lorena nodded, lips pursed. She clenched a note scribbled on yellow legal paper.

"You have to stand up for yourself if they are going to quit calling our home. Mrs. Channing will call their parents, but you have to be strong."

"All right, Mom," Lorena said.

"Tell your teacher when they start up."

"It's none of your business. Can't I just go? The other parents are all leaving."

Her mother reached across the car, but Lorena brushed her hand away before she could touch her cheek.

Lorena kept her eyes focused on the ground all the way to homeroom. She could feel the note in her hand burning red hot like her blushing cheeks. Her book bag pulled at her shoulders, weighed down by the heavy literature and history books. Lorena did extra work to be able to get a scholarship to a school far away from Kershaw County, to leave her classmates and the town behind.

Lorena entered Mrs. Channing's room and heard the first of the gossip starting that day. Mrs. Channing was a hall monitor, which gave the other students time to tease Lorena. Usually it lasted no more than five minutes and if she recited all of her homework answers, she could

ignore the others. She set the note down on the teacher's desk and sat in her assigned seat at the front of the class. Behind her, she could hear the girls laugh.

"Like our messages, Lorena? Your mom sounds even crazier on a recording."

"Where's your dad? He get scared off too?"

"Maybe she doesn't have a dad. They could both be aliens abandoned here on Earth cause their own kind didn't even want them."

Another girl strolled up to the front desk. "What do we have here?" She plucked the note from the desk.

Lorena felt her face slacken in her panic. She could not think of an escape quickly enough before the girl finished reading her mother's complaint.

"Sounds like she wasn't so impressed." The girl smirked, looked out the door to make sure Mrs. Channing was not watching, and dangled the note within Lorena's reach.

Lorena tried to grab it, but the girl was too quick.

"Better try again."

Lorena could feel the heat from her mother's passing touch and the shame of walking through the hallways alone, pointed at and laughed at until she felt as if she could not make it one step further. She stood up. When the girl turned back to her, she landed a punch on the girl's nose, her exact aim shocking her more than the blow.

Lorena could barely hear the girl's screams from the blood rushing in her ears. Her fist hurt and her knuckles were red, but she could not feel the rest of her arms or her body. She watched Mrs. Channing enter the classroom and kneel beside the girl. Mrs. Channing pressed a tissue to the girl's nose and commanded another student to bring the box from the desk. Lorena didn't see whose body owned the hands, only the box of tissue passed from one palm to the next,

then discarded, empty, on the floor. Lorena tried to hear beyond her heartbeat, but the rush was too loud. As she helped the student up, Mrs. Channing took the note still crumpled in the girl's grasp and read it.

Mrs. Channing looked Lorena in the eyes, then looked down at the other student. "Take your things to Guidance. I will be there after she gets to the nurse."

The burning passed from Lorena's head to her stomach as her actions and their probable consequences became evident. She could deal with the in-school suspension she was likely to receive, but her fellow students would be unbearable now. She had made her decision and there was no taking it back. She would be hated forever.

Lorena grabbed her bag and escaped into the hallway. Since she was in trouble anyway, she stopped for a drink of water at the fountain. The water splashed across her cheeks and nose, and Lorena held down the button until she could no longer hold her breath. After she wiped her face with her sleeve, she walked to the office and lay down on the couch below the windows opening onto the hallway.

She sat in guidance trying to be as silent as possible. She listened to the secretary make phone calls and to the administrators walking back and forth between their offices and the hallway.

Lorena heard Mrs. Channing enter by the sound of her heels on the tile floor. "I'm sorry for what they did to you, but, Lorena, you knew better than that."

"Can we skip how disappointed you are? I will need my homework assignments for as long as I'll be out."

Her teacher bent over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "As long as you know the consequences, I will talk to the principal."

Lorena nodded once. She listened as Mrs. Channing explained and as her punishment was established for a week of out-of-school. They talked about her in calm, even tones. Lorena wanted someone to get angry. She wanted the rush in her ears again, the feeling in her stomach that something had truly happened, not just to her but by her.

When her mother arrived late from the House, Lorena barely heard the murmurs as the school staff explained the situation. Lorena didn't look at her mother. She stared at the ceiling, counted the light bulbs that had gone out. Why did her mother have to be *her* mother? Why did she have to be so calm and quiet about how the other kids bullied her? Why was she so quiet all of the time? Just because they were both aliens didn't give her mother the right to be sad. People were abandoned all the time. Her mother made her angrier than all of the other kids. She turned her head aside as her mother knelt before her.

"Lorena, honey—"

"Don't talk."

"I need to take you home."

"I don't want to go home with you. Don't you see? This is all your fault." Lorena could not control the screams escaping from her lips no matter how much she hugged her arms around her chest. When tears fell on her arms, she knew she had to get out of the school before the others could see her cry. She grabbed her book bag and ran to her mother's falling-apart station wagon.

She tried to ignore her mother's frown while she pulled open the car door and slammed it shut behind her.

#

"Doing all right?" Mrs. Netherwood asked.

Lorena nodded. She placed a hand on one of the steps. She no longer felt pain or embarrassment from her memories. Reserve and lightness filled her as she stepped out of the cubby and pushed the door closed.

The two women smiled at each other. They both were thinking of Lorena's mother, sharing the knowledge without words that Rosamond's influence would remain a constant here as long as the structure remained standing. Lorena and Mrs. Netherwood walked downstairs to end the tour. Instead of saying her goodbyes, Lorena held open the front door.

"Come on, I got something for you." Lorena turned and walked toward her car, knowing the old woman's curiosity would make her follow. The breeze was a welcome relief from the heat trapped within the plantation home. The leaves in the oak trees rustled, and Lorena remembered lying underneath them until the sun disappeared from the sky and her mother called her from across the lawn. She popped her trunk open and rifled through the garment bags folded neatly within.

Mrs. Netherwood's eyes teared. "Oh, Lorena, I'm so sorry about Rosie. I'm sorry to see there wasn't any service to attend."

The half apology was well meant, even if it made Lorena smart from any insinuation that she had been negligent in honoring her mother's memory. "She didn't want any fuss made over her. Just the obit in the paper." She handed a stack of gowns to Mrs. Netherwood. "I thought you would like the dresses. You could set them up on mannequins and add a buck to your ticket price for seeing the replicas."

Mrs. Netherwood pulled out the brown cotton day gown that her mother had always worn to reenactments. Lorena noticed tears in the corners of the woman's eyes and took a few deep

breaths. She pretended to be glad to give up the dress, she wanted to be happy that they would be put to good use, and she pulled up the corners of her mouth into the best smile she could manage.

“I’ll get our volunteers started on ideas right away,” Mrs. Netherwood said.

Lorena looked up at the house painted white, surrounded by full-leaved trees. Visiting had been the right idea. She could always count on the memories of the grateful look in Mrs. Netherwood’s eyes and the lilies and the oaks and the flowerbeds, the new whitewash, and the feeling that her mother would have done the same.

Lorena pulled out the rest of the dresses and the couple pieces of hair jewelry she was donating and helped the older woman carry them up to the porch.

Mrs. Netherwood counted the bags. “What about the pink dress?”

Lorena had known it would be missed from the collection. The prize of all her mother’s creations, Rosamond had only taken out the pale rose dress for the most special of occasions. Lorena had wanted to give it up as she did the others, but hadn’t been able to put it in the trunk.

“That will be going back with me to St. Clair tomorrow.”

“You take care, and don’t let it be another seven years without a visit.”

“It won’t,” Lorena lied.

She walked back to her car. All the while, she told herself there would be no looking back, no glancing in the rear-view mirror. And she didn’t.

#

Lorena drove south of St. Clair, through the marshes then out to one of the barrier islands. The sandy parking lot was deserted. The sand dunes hid the ocean from her sight, but the saltiness in the air told Lorena she was home. She’d missed the constant noise of the tides and the bustle of living in a port city. Lorena kicked off her shoes and felt the rough sand cover her

toes. She wished for a second she had a bathing suit, but looked back at the urn, which she unbuckled and cradled in her arms.

Lorena followed the sounds of gulls up one side of a hill and down the other, a path cut in between the larger dunes sprinkled with sea oats moving in time with the wind. She brushed the tops of the sea oats with her fingertips, careful not to break any stems. When she reached the line that separated dry sand from wet, land from sea, she buried her feet and watched boats heading to shore for the night. All the manmade sounds ended until it was just her and the animals and the water.

The few seagulls that had not drifted off for the evening were curious, probably thinking the container she carried held food. When she offered them nothing, they grew bored with her. She unscrewed the lid of the urn. She walked into the water until the surf foamed mid-calf. The breeze around her legs blew toward the beach then away, affected by the pull of the tide, a slow breathy pulse. The sun lowered behind the dunes, and the water at her feet grew murkier. Far off across the water, the horizon was soft purple, the sunlight all but gone.

This was her favorite beach to go to, days when she was stressed out from student conferences and the amount of research she had piled across her desk. She would lie back, eyes closed, and drift with current a while. Now, she wanted her mother to feel that sort of peace too, wherever she was. Perhaps there really was no defining moment between youth and adulthood, just a choice when to accept yourself and to forgive the rest.

Lorena poured out a palm full of ash and let it fall into the water. Waves rolled back her way, and she paused. She didn't want her mother's ashes to wash up on her legs. When the tide rolled away from her again, she overturned the glass. She felt the nodes along the base of the urn, counted them the way her mother used to count strands of hair, the number of objects she needed

to leave the house with, how many bottles belonged in the shower. The remains left a residue on the glass. She wanted to throw the urn in the water too, but she felt she ought to keep something from her mother's death. She'd figure out a use for it later. Lorena bent toward the water and washed the urn and her hands in the salty water. She said goodbye to the waves and to the day. The tide spread away from her, across the ocean from St. Clair and Lorena.

NORTH COUNTRY

At the edge of Derry, Eve could see no one and could hear nothing beyond the wind, and that was how she wanted it. Already she'd missed the last bus to the Giant's Causeway and was now determined to make the most of a day in a city she'd known nothing about except you passed through it to get to the Causeway. She stood atop a bridge between two rounded towers. She stood above a portcullis, which was above a street. In Derry. In Ireland. Across an entire ocean from America. She was three thousand miles away, but she didn't feel different, moved, the way she and her ex-husband, Glen, had always thought Ireland—any foreign country, really—might change them. She felt superficial for believing in such a stereotype.

Her guidebook hadn't told her much about Derry either beyond its history during the Irish Troubles. She'd put the guidebook away, took out one of William Butler Yeats' poetry, and climbed the hill between the train station and downtown Derry. At least if there had been a castle, she could have occupied herself for the afternoon. Near lunchtime, she walked halfway around Derry, south atop the ancient fortified walls. The cannons took up a good five minutes, their bodies cemented to the walkways, the hollow filled with moss and rain. Inside the gates, churches sat in the middle of roads, alleys dead-ended, streets curved with the fortifications rather than aligning with the cardinal directions. She'd taken one look at the interior and returned her focus to the walls. She longed for the organization of St. Clair.

The gray slates were large as her torso. Dark, moss-like growths clung to the railings. A round metal sign implanted in the stone declared the name of this particular portcullis *New Gate*. Behind her, suburbs stretched up the side of an emerald-green hill. The houses looked like identical beige shoeboxes laid out in a patternless whorl, a reflection of the downtown. Ireland

certainly lived up to her nickname, even in the gray rain and cloud cover that hadn't broken once since she arrived.

How was St. Clair getting along without her? The art gallery could function a week without an employee. Her best friend promised to wait on the porch for the new appliance deliveries. Each potential worry had a logical, calm solution. Eve would have to worry about her trip instead.

Over the short gusts of wind and rain, she heard whistling. A man stumbled along the old stone walkway, a plastic bag containing a six-pack in hand. He tottered either from age or alcohol. His tweed pageboy cap and sport jacket matched, and struck her as very Irish, even if he was disheveled. The brown patches at the elbows were faded, and the top of his hat snagged where a button had pulled away. Tufts of white hair sprouted from his temples and blew in the March air. Eve looked down at her poetry book she'd been reading at intervals and left open on the wet slate. The man reminded her of one of Yeats' hallucinations, though this one wasn't about a cat. He waved to catch her eye, but Eve turned away.

The pages bent into the creases of her fingers where she clenched the book. In college, she never took English courses unless they were mandatory. Her pleasure in reading came as a shock, another surprise she'd learned since her divorce, and she became braver each time she entered the bookstore. She'd discovered Yeats, then found herself desiring to leave her home. Glen had always wanted to spend an anniversary in Ireland. She used that as an excuse to buy four guidebooks and round-trip tickets and to celebrate her own anniversary—six months living alone. However, she couldn't read in Ireland. She felt just as empty reading as she did thinking about her lack of emotional response abroad. She turned her gaze from the words onto the

columns on the nearby courthouse—two-stories tall, Corinthian. It resembled the church she and her parents had attended, the one she'd stopped attending after her marriage.

"Miss, what're you staring at? Nothing exciting happening there," he said.

"On holiday," she said, a phrase she'd found in her guidebook. Even with the Irish slang, her Southern accent gave her away as soon as she spoke. Her vowels seemed to elongate the more time she spent abroad. She thought of all the phrases she could have responded with, *Nice weather, thank you*—despite being overcast and quite chilly—and *no, I can't direct you to the nearest cash point, but I can tell you where the train station is and on which train I'll be leaving this afternoon*. But she didn't want to leave, not really.

The man grinned and took a drink from the open can in his left hand. "Enjoying yourself, then?"

"Very much. Beautiful scenery. Quiet most of the time."

He staggered. After looking around and seeing nothing within a step, he walked to the opposite side of the bridge and leaned against the stone railing. Each of his movements was exaggerated, his arms lifted from his sides for balance, his hand reaching to make contact before the rest of his body. They made a comic pair, his wild motions and her small, timid ones. She pulled down the sleeves of her red raincoat to cover her palms and hid further within the hood. The old man studied an umbrella that someone had left behind and offered it to Eve, noting that she did not carry one. She didn't need it. After the first one broke as soon as she stepped out of the Dublin airport, she had not bothered buying another since. She drew the book closer to her face in a wide arc. She read:

'The Dedication to a Book of Stories Selected from the Irish Novelists'

There was a green branch hung with many a bell

*When her own people ruled this tragic Eire;
And from its murmuring greenness, calm of Faery,
A Druid kindness, on all hearers fell.*

She didn't know how to pronounce "Eire" and looked over her shoulder at the man as she said it to gauge his reaction. If he did hear her, he said nothing, and she continued. Her mother-in-law, Queenie, would have liked Yeats, would have liked the strong sense of sound and the mischievous women. Eve wanted to tell Queenie so much about her life, now when it was no longer possible. All she was left with was a strange old Irish man. She felt his eyes focused on the back of her head, on her torso, and was sure his eyes' trip did not end there.

"I'm visiting from America," she said.

"Obvious you're a Yank. You don't ignore the rain the way you ought."

"How can you ignore it? I haven't been dry in three days."

He coughed and drank from his can. "Drown your insides then it'll all be the same."

As long as it took Eve to skim three long poems, the man spoke about the history of the bridge, interspersing the dialogue with details about his moves around downtown. He seemed to be from everywhere in Derry all at once, from prehistory to the present, he knew the names of all of the buildings nearby—and he pointed to each even though she still looked down at her book. In college, Eve had learned the French have two words for pride, one for the good kind and one for the bad. Did the Irish make that distinction too, and which kind would he be? He introduced himself as Callaghan—though she couldn't tell if that was a first or last name. Eve lost her attention to the wind and the poetry and the security she no longer felt about her sense of judgment, because Callaghan seemed trustworthy even if she didn't know him.

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, And loved the sorrows of your changing face— A bell struck noon, cutting off Yeats mid-sentence.

Callaghan cleared his throat and took another sip. He fiddled with the tab on the can and, when it broke off, absentmindedly threw it over the side of the bridge. “Where are you taking lunch?”

“Do you have somewhere in mind?” Eve clamped her book shut with one hand and tucked it into her purse.

“Want to join me?”

Eve shrugged and nodded once. Why not trust a local? If he knew Derry as well as he said, then he’d at least find her good food.

Callaghan took a last swig, dropped the can into his plastic bag, and motioned for Eve to follow. He left her no time to second guess her decision or didn’t care if she stayed put. She didn’t ask.

They descended the gate by the stone stairway hidden by the tower. There were no handrails, and it would have been easy to slip from the slick spring rain on the slate rock. Even the St. Clair plantation homes had had to install handrails to protect themselves from lawsuits, a difference of aesthetics and political correctness between America and Ireland. Eve pulled the flaps of her raincoat tighter and quickened her steps. Callaghan was nimble for a man who could be her grandfather, like someone who grew up walking with long strides through fields who never quite got used to the flat, close feeling of cities. She wished she’d known her grandfather, but he had died young. All of her family had died young. She didn’t mourn their passing, more that she never made strong connections with any of her relations. She missed hearing Queenie’s

voice calling from downstairs for more tea. She missed helping the woman choose her Sunday outfits and selecting jewelry to match.

Eve and Callaghan passed the courthouse and church gates wrought with gold and silver. The massive law and religious buildings gave way to homes and small businesses just as slate gave way to decorative thatch. A growing number of people crowded the sidewalks. The nearer they walked to the center of town, the closer the buildings squeezed together until Eve could see nothing but solid walls of storefronts and homes. Eve felt the pressure of eyes and bodies as they brushed past her on the sidewalk. Perhaps choosing red for a raincoat hadn't been the best idea.

The center of town opened into a large plaza. The north-south and east-west main streets collided in a roundabout. Shoppers and cars swirled about the hub. A pillar stood in the middle of all the motion, cut off from curious tourists and their photographs by a never-ending stream of vehicles. Even from across the street, Eve perceived the winding panel of characters carved in high relief. The frieze depicted men signing a piece of paper, others spraying crowds with bronze immobile bullets. The shock and terror were unmistakable, the craftsmanship unparalleled, nothing like the beach-and-seagull scenes so popular in her art gallery. The characters fell deeper down the slope of their history, and Eve with them. Derry displayed the Troubles, no shame, no need to hide its peoples' fear. Eve's family still didn't talk about racism, and here an entire nation's foibles were displayed for the entire world to see.

At a street corner, Callaghan dipped under an awning, dusted the droplets of moisture from his shoulders, and then held open a door bearing a plaque which read, "The Black Centaur." At first she thought he might forget she was following him and slam the door in her face. Yet, despite the drinking, despite hardly saying a word to her as they walked, despite turning his back to her block after block, he paused and smiled at her as she entered the pub. He

lacked the usual smug awareness of Southern gentlemen who congratulated themselves for opening doors and pulling out chairs. Women only wanted those things after they received recognition of their independence. Callaghan would have fit right in with The Preservation Society of St. Clair, would have been the perfect debutant escort, would have been a choice conversation partner long after the dancing died away. Since she'd followed him this far off her planned route, she plunged headfirst into the pub. It took her eyes a moment to adjust, for her senses to reconfigure to the dark intimacy of the two rooms.

The interior was dim. The overhead lights were spaced few and far between and glowed an orange hue, more like the residual illumination after the sun has set beneath the horizon than direct noon light. Slim rectangular windows which lined the outer wall allowed daylight to shine on the bar, but missed the tables. The wood panels looked damp, as if they had soaked up the weather outside and dragged it indoors. Soot blackened the fireplace next to the bar. Following Callaghan's example, Eve took off her raincoat and hung it up on a peg near the front door, out of her reach. Fair game for strangers. She should have asked a Derry towns person to trade for the dark colors that they favored.

Callaghan walked up to the counter and set down his bag of beer cans. "Keep an eye on that, will you?" he asked the bartender.

The bartender stared at the bag, but she didn't touch it. Instead she raised an eyebrow and continued washing the glasses stacked beside her on the countertop. "What would you like?"

As Eve had learned over the previous three days, it was customary to place orders at the counter. She deferred with a nod to Callaghan, who ordered two burgers and two baskets of chips. Too American, perhaps, but she was relieved that the word *pudding* was nowhere in that order. Her palate wanted food, not an experiment.

Finally, the bartender grabbed the bag of cans, stored it below the counter, and grabbed two glasses from the stacks piled along the back shelf three rows deep. She filled first one then the other. Eve could have watched her work all day, huffing as she pushed her black hair from her smooth, colorless face, the fat dimpling around her elbow as she bent the lever to pour their beers. The bartender had a particular way of leaning the glass on the spigot at an angle, letting some of the head run over the glass, then resting the glass on its base for the head to settle before she finished filling it to the brim.

Callaghan plucked his glass from the counter, then chose a table in the center of the pub. He pulled out a chair to indicate Eve's place, then he sat down across from it. He didn't seem to notice the other patrons' stares, but Eve felt their judgment from all sides, as if they knew her life story and judged her for all its upsets. As she fell onto her chair, it nearly toppled over, and she grabbed the table for support.

She wished she were as socially adept as the Olivia Shakespears or Lady Gregorys in her Yeats book, to capture so many hearts, including that of a poet, and to be captured forever in verse. Or maybe as noble as Queenie. Eve was no one's idea of a Muse. Instead, she drew curious—sometimes hostile—glances from locals, as if she'd shaved her head. In Dublin and even Belfast, she'd been less conspicuous, but visitors stuck out in Derry. St. Clair had so many visitors that new faces looking up her driveway to her piazza, trying to see through the lace curtains of the living room, wasn't cause for alarm. It was foolish to believe that all places were the same. No one asked for her to stare at their thatch roofs or rain-soaked offices.

"Do you smoke?" Callaghan asked.

Eve shook her head.

“Neither do I. Used to before they made me give it up. Like watching people do it though.” Then he patted the side of his glass. “Can’t take away all my sins. I’ll be in my grave before they can pry the can from my grip.”

To show appreciation, Eve took a sip of her beer. She’d never been much of a drinker, even in college when perhaps she should have taken a few more nights off studying, when people usually develop their tastes in literature and travel. A glass of wine at dinner left her flustered. Perhaps the glow of the weak Irish day through the aged pub and the red of Callaghan’s cheeks from the wind were worth giving the dark liquid a chance. She shuddered from the stout’s yeasty alcohol taste.

“Have you always lived here?” she asked.

“All my life. Except a year in Belfast, but that was not for me. The farm went to my brother, so I moved into town. I find the pace not much quicker here.”

“Any children? A wife?”

“You interested?”

Callaghan laughed, his shoulders rolling up and down as he clapped his open palms on the table. He removed his cap and hung it on the chair back.

After her first instinct to blush wore off, she gave in and laughed too. How was she supposed to interpret Callaghan? Flirting? Protective? The lines on Callaghan’s face, his creased and calloused hands, the curve of his upper spine, all reasons she’d immediately dismissed him. It was hard to tell exactly how old he was. For certain, he could pass for Eve’s father, but it was possible he could be a generation older than that. Perhaps all Irish men came into their own virility later in life, just as Yeats had taken a wife who could have been his daughter. Callaghan and Yeats made Eve feel like a child, more of her lifetime ahead of her than behind. Even though

Callaghan was clearly off limits—he was far older than Queenie, and she most certainly wouldn't approve—he was a reminder that Eve should look when she felt ready.

“I lost my family some time ago,” he continued. “The bomb was an accident, wasn't meant for them.”

“I'm sorry to hear about your family.”

“Such is life. I will see them again.” Though the tone of his voice dropped, Callaghan smiled. He took another swig of his beer. He weathered loss just as he did the constant rain, with a quick laugh and a shrug-like gesture of waving his arm in a circle, indicating not only the room but all life beyond its walls. “What do you do?”

The bartender interrupted their conversation and set down two plates and two baskets. Eve chanced a glance around the room, but no one else stared at them any more. Their audience must have come to the conclusion, for all her bright clothing and accent, that she was harmless. She felt that way, bogged down from the clouds and drizzle, lost for words among strangers.

“I'm a professional traveler.” Eve said. “Do those really exist? Seriously, I work in a small art gallery. I help with the accounting sometimes and package pieces and ship them and redecorate sometimes.”

“A wonderful job.”

“It would be if it covered my property taxes and renovation bills.”

“And your husband?”

Eve blushed. “Ex-husband.”

“How long ago?”

“Six months.”

Callaghan reached over their plates and patted her hand.

A woman walked up to their table, waved at Callaghan, and reached for Eve's basket.

"Do you mind?"

Eve responded that she could take whatever she liked.

She paused, her hand in the air. Her short, gray hair cut to her jaw line and reading glasses sitting atop her head made her appear older than Callaghan. She shifted her weight from one foot to another.

"I was telling my husband that Derry girls are polite, but you do me no good, being American and all. I guess I have to wait for more proof," the woman said.

"You're still welcome."

"This man is no good. You should be touring with your husband." She pointed at the ring on Eve's left hand, the one she hadn't bothered to remove. The feeling of the ring missing from her finger, the pressure of constant absence, troubled her more than wearing it. The ring was antique, and had belonged to Glen's grandmother. Eve could have replaced it with one of Queenie's rings, but this one was hers, this was her claim to being a Demerest without being one by blood.

She removed her hand from the table, hid it under the napkin folded on her lap.

"I'm by myself."

"Enjoying your holiday?" The woman crossed her arms.

Callaghan, who had been focusing intently on his food during Eve's exchange with the old woman, looked up at her now. "Showing Ms. Demerest around is all. I told her about the construction of the walls. Good day."

The woman turned away from their table and sat across from a gentleman near the pub's entrance. She stared through the window in the door as her husband glanced back and forth between her and Callaghan.

Callaghan remained quiet. His leg jogged up and down, and he slid his glass along the edge of the table. Eve knew there was something that he wanted to ask. She figured she knew what it would be.

"My ex-husband had always wanted to go. My last name is French, Huguenot, but everyone talks about how fantastic this country is. I'd never thought of leaving South Carolina. I never had a reason." Eve drummed on the table with her fingers. She wished she had a hobby—like smoking but a distraction less toxic—that would occupy her fingers.

"There was no one to travel with you?"

"Everyone else I know works. No one else could take the time off."

"You could make friends. The Irish are friendly, I hear."

"No one will talk to me."

"I believe I do count as someone. Might be part fish, the way I drink, but only part."

Eve rested her head in her hands. She closed her eyes and hid behind her fingers for a moment. "I'm so sorry. I want to talk to people. I guess others don't see me as the most approachable person. Truth is, I have only a few friends back home. I go to work. I stay at home. This was supposed to be my great adventure, and I hardly leave my hotels."

"Not to worry." Callaghan ate the last of his fries then lifted some from her basket and placed them in his.

She swallowed the remaining gulps of the beer. The back of her tongue revolted and gagged, and, for a second, she believed she would be sick.

“Why should I tell a stranger all of this?” she said when her stomach settled. She took a bite of her burger and chewed slowly, counting the bites.

“Strange men enjoy listening to your problems, even if you don’t enjoy telling them.”

She stammered “Thank you,” appalled at her own lack of awareness of—or reserve of—the words she said. He nodded, but said nothing. They finished their meals in silence, gaps between mouthfuls filled with reassuring smiles. He finished first, then stood, placed his cap on his head, and retrieved his bag from the bartender. Eve watched him tip his hat at the old woman and her husband by the door. Eve smiled, charmed once again.

After she pulled on her raincoat, they exited the pub and stood on the street corner. People walked around them, but no one made eye contact or spoke. Eve looked at her watch. Only an hour until she returned to Belfast.

“Did I miss any of Derry’s highlights?” Eve asked.

Callaghan lifted his cap with a finger and scratched his white-blond hair. “Not the happy sights. The Troubles monuments are not for you.”

“Then let me return the favor by getting you another drink.”

He raised his bag.

“Well I should get going then.”

She looked east down one of the main thoroughfares. It ran straight into a large building, not the gate she’d walked through from the station.

“I think I’d get lost walking back to the train station. Can you take me?”

“Happy to.”

Callaghan weaved through the streets. He chose a path that lead past houses instead of stores. One house, a small square cottage-like box, had whitewashed walls and red trim around

the solitary window. Eve paused and rested her hand on the house's wrought-iron gate. The rosebushes in the garden, trimmed back for the winter, had new growth starting to peek, nodes that made the branches knobby. All the landmarks preserved in St. Clair were imposing, state or county buildings of importance or townhouses meant to impress wealth and status. This cottage was maintained only by the love of its owners.

Soon they arrived at the eastern gate, the partner of the one on which they had met. Before Eve could say goodbye, Callaghan pulled her up the stairs to the bridge. He turned his back to the city and stood for some time, hands in his pockets and the bag of cans tapping his leg. The green hills immediately beyond the town were spotted with the cream-colored houses. In the distance stone fences crisscrossed the farmland.

"Do you see out there?" Callaghan asked. "And beyond that, there are more farms. Then maybe the ocean. Then your country and another ocean. An entire world. Take your chance, dear."

She began to ask him what he meant, but he shook his head. He adjusted his cap and started humming an old tune she recognized from other pubs. He descended the stairway and disappeared behind the buildings into the misting rain.

Eve stuck her hands in her pocket and rotated her train ticket, stopping at each corner to press it into the flesh of her finger. She wandered down the hill toward the station. The attendant read her ticket and indicated the platform where she should wait, a half an hour that felt like an entire day. She tried to read first on the platform and then during the train ride, but couldn't focus. She imagined a small cabin like Yeats' *Innisfree*, living alone with the beans and the bees and the sound of the water always outside her door. Perhaps if she found an island off the South

Carolina coast to settle on, years down the road when she knew she could give up her townhouse without regret.

Eve counted the hills on the way to Belfast. The scenery close to the train passed the window so rapidly she couldn't make out some of the blurred shapes. Droplets of rain trailed horizontally across the window. She opened her guidebook and chose a restaurant for dinner.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

I did not know that Lorena's story would turn into the story of my thesis when I was jotting the first draft of "Under the Magnifying Glass" on a bench near the University of Central Florida's Health Center in August 2010. I was experiencing my first pangs of Florida heat and humidity, simultaneously the same and different (more humidity but slightly cooler) from the South Carolina air I had breathed the majority of my life. I was beginning a new life 450 miles away from my family and beginning my longest writing project, a 150-page short story collection comprised mostly of linked narratives entwining the lives of four women: Lorena, Rosamond, Eve, and Queenie. For the past two years, these women have intrigued me, possessed me, and have enabled me to learn more about the craft of writing in a shorter period of time than I have been able to before.

One of our assignments for Susan Hubbard's Form and Theory course was to introduce a short story that we would have selected for our own compilation of *You've Got to Read This*. I chose "The Black Room," one of John Updike's stories about a male protagonist and his mother, and one of dozens in which Updike recasts this scenario over the course of his literary career. For this introduction, I wrote, "'The Black Room' and many of Updike's stories question personal history and perception." Then, even as now, I was interested in thematic questions of identity and how personal histories influence how my characters think and see the world. How does identity hold us back? Can we change how we think about ourselves when history is a socially respected construct? These questions are most prevalent in the seven core stories that link Eve and Lorena and their mother figures in my fictional town of St. Clair, South Carolina.

I primarily explore these themes through the subject matter of mother-daughter relationships and female friendships. All of my narrators are female. I tried writing stories from

male points of view during my two years at UCF, but none of the voices held me long enough to complete their stories and including a couple in my thesis would have felt inorganic. Many of the characters in this collection struggle with mother-daughter type relationships. Lorena's two stories center on her desire to resolve her complicated feelings about her mother, Rosamond. As "Under the Magnifying Glass" opens, we learn that they have been estranged for years, even though Rosamond has been under a coma for the last two of those years. Lorena partly blames Rosamond for the trauma she experienced being bullied as a child. Yet, for all of her seeming dislike of Rosamond, Lorena is completing a dissertation in the area of history with which Rosamond was most fascinated. One woman is a history teacher, and the other a tour guide and preservationist. "Staring at the Moon" looks at their relationship from the opposite point of view, and I hope that some of the tension of Lorena's final story arises from the way that Lorena and Rosamond can never manage to realize how the other thinks and feels.

Eve and Queenie share a similar situation of initial misunderstanding, but I feel that their relationship becomes more positive by the end of the collection. In the first few scenes of "Renovations," Eve feels lackluster compared to Queenie. They are both married-in Demerests, but Queenie got something right that Eve feels she did not, primarily marriage but also being a confidant woman. By learning from the examples Queenie set, Eve is inspired by the older woman's spirit to take charge of her divorce and her life. The middle two stories show Eve and Queenie before they find each other. Eve did not have a female role model of the sort she needed, which we learn about in "Braids" from the difficulties between Eve and her mother. In "Piazza," Queenie comes into her own strength and station within the St. Clair society. She loves her son and her friends, and the support she receives from both allows her to face the issues in her marriage. The collection ends with Eve again at the start of her new life. Though she is

uncomfortable being in a new place, I feel that the core she has built from her relationship with Queenie enables her to move forward.

Overall, the title *Renovations* speaks to all of the collection's stories in that my female characters are undergoing renovations of their identities, their bodies, their jobs, their schools, their marriages, or their divorces. The word "renovation," as first cited in the Oxford English Dictionary, came into usage with the meaning of spiritual change. That title was the first I came up with for the first draft of the first story I presented to workshop, and that motif survived from story to story.

History and identity interest me because different cultures approach the two concepts from different vantage points. Traditionally, the South and its people are reverential toward the past. As much as seems a cliché, men and women still argue the merits of the battle flag of the Confederacy flying over the South Carolina State House. I accidentally wandered into an interview with a good friend of mine on the subject of family histories. We had been friends since we were eight, and, until writing this collection, I had never known that he traces his lineage to the first Dukes who came to South Carolina by the way of Barbados. He knows how they migrated west to the Midlands over three centuries, how there is still a town on the coast named for a line of his family. Though the Dukes were always middle class (not like the "indigo blood" of Queenie and coastal Carolinians such as her), they also take pride in a heritage that goes back before the Civil War and even the Revolutionary War, an influence I see best in Rosamond's thread of *Renovations*. On the other hand, I moved to South Carolina from the West and was raised by my father, who stems from two ranching clans, whose ancestors never lived east of the Mississippi. The West is traditionally the place to which one escaped to in order to create a new identity, to erase a past personal narrative, to become a new man or woman. Having

studied both Southern and Western cultures in literature, journalism, movies, and other various media in undergraduate college, the pull between my two identities, my two histories, was something I wanted to play with thematically in my fiction.

The organization of this collection revolves around what can be learned about the linked characters by interrupting Eve's and Lorena's narratives with stories from the points of view of their mother figures or younger selves. Though I began writing Lorena's stories first, the ones that involve Eve and Queenie best represent the heart of the collection. As stated above, "Renovations" has always provided the backbone of the collection. Eve is most vulnerable in this story than at any other point in the thesis. For the same reason, "Under the Magnifying Glass" follows as the second story because it is an introduction to Lorena and her conflict with her mother and her job. I placed "Staring at the Moon" and "Piazza" in the middle of *Renovations* because I wanted Rosamond's and Queenie's viewpoints to complicate what the reader already understands about Eve and Lorena. I was influenced by collections such as Dylan Landis's *Normal People Don't Live Like This* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* to not adhere strictly to a chronological arrangement. It is my hope that these stories will stand alone yet work together to strengthen overall characterization of the women who appear multiple times throughout the collection, as well as to create a narrative that flows over the lifetimes of two generations of characters. For the three stories that are not related by characters, I organized them from strongest to weakest. "Charleston Mud Hens" has another twenty-five-year-old female protagonist in St. Clair and logically followed the first two stories. "Hilum" is the most humorous story in the collection, so I placed it after "Braids," which I do not feel concludes in a positive place for Eve. The final three stories, including "Tidal Motion," are about characters who learn to accept their situations and move forward.

During my final semester of undergrad, I took a class about contemporary Southern writing and whether it is legitimate to say that a region has its own literature. Most writers do not aim to have only regional appeal, but desire to speak universally about some aspect of being human. While the class did not come to any conclusions whether a regional label is good or bad, it did begin my process of questioning that led to this thesis project. Regional identity and what the South means to me are other topics driving my collection. In “Charleston Mud Hens,” Sadie is a Northerner who wants to fit in with her Southern coworkers. She alters dessert recipes as a means of belonging. She encounters an editor of a famous Southern homemaking magazine, which echoes the *Southern Living* and Paula Deen stereotypes that, for good or ill, have come to represent a version of the Southern woman. “Braids” examines Eve’s upbringing and how she interacts with a white girl who wants to wear cornrows and listen to rap music. In “Tidal Motion,” Iris goes to college away from St. Clair and only learns how to appreciate her new home after witnessing the damage it suffers from flash flooding. I have seen these issues at work in the South in which I grew up, but they do not belong to a particular place. Given enough tweaking, these stories could take place in New England or France or anywhere.

Therefore, I do not consider myself a regional author. While *Renovations* is set in South Carolina, I know that my writing will not be confined to this region or to characters from the South. My undergraduate thesis was about New York City, and my latest stories and one flash fiction piece are set in Nebraska, where half of my father’s family is from. As I learned in my independent study of Southern literature with Dr. Kathy Seidel, one obstacle the reader faces when thinking about regional writing is the issue of stereotypes. Are women more a Scarlet O’Hara or Melanie Wilkes of *Gone with the Wind*? Do men have to live up to the gentleman stereotype, as Quentin Compson faces in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*?

There was something of a debate about my characters Eve and Lorena during Darlin' Neal's workshop, whether I meant for them to be the ineffectual Southern belle type. Whereas the real issue was that there was not enough action or movement to my characters and stories, the readers associated this problem instead with a Southern stereotype that I never intended. I had to amend that issue and differentiate my female characters. While I feel that fewer and fewer people associate those caricatures of the past with literature produced in today's South, I have experienced firsthand that there is a reticence for people to let go of those types as soon as they hear the author mention "South." Labeling some works as "Southern" and others as "non-Southern" can have positive and negative effects. While region may be great for book sales, that is a question for publishers and bookstores, not for me as an author.

Setting is an important element in my writing, and I see its use as one of the strengths in my work. Often, I will know the setting of a story before I know the plot or characters. While writing the first few story drafts, I wanted to set the collection in Charleston, but I felt restricted by what I already knew of the city. There was no way to parse the real geography and the types of people who live on the Charleston peninsula with the mix of people I wanted to represent in *Renovations*. I had to complete other research to fully realize a new setting. My fictional town, St. Clair, is based on Charleston and Savannah and a bit of St. Augustine. As with all major Atlantic coastal cities, tourism is a key concern for locals. Also, the historic flock to the "Sun Belt" of the Southeast and Southwest after World War II meant growth in the suburbs of non-Southerners, such as Eve's and Iris's families. Walter Edgar's *South Carolina: A History* was another inspiration for learning about the state.

Setting is a motivational force because people think of themselves in relation to their location, either positively or in direct opposition to the landscape or the culture of a particular place. Eudora Welty's "No Place for You, My Love" has been a constant influence on how I see setting working in stories. The swamps and mosquitoes of her Louisiana are tangible. Welty often personifies aspects of the land or its fauna until Louisiana is as much a character of the story as are the man or the woman. While my setting is not as pervasive in *Renovations* as in Welty's story, I hope that it connects all of the stories with a certain tone.

I use setting to create tension, is used as a means to create questions about my characters. In the most general sense, the setting of the South is a means to create trouble for outsider characters. Even though Sadie in "Charleston Mud Hens" has lived in South Carolina for years, she still feels that she does not belong. During the course of the story, she never thinks about leaving, but her unspoken choice to stay was important for me to know as the writer. Her place as a Northerner created natural tension underlying the conflict between Sadie and Barb and Sadie and Matilda. Using specific locations, such as the Bairstow House, is another way for tension to emerge from setting. Lorena is resistant to returning to the house that holds bad memories for her. Along the lines of Welty's personification, the house represents pain to Lorena, and it sparks memories that I showed in flashback. Sadie and Lorena were the two characters whose voices I heard well before their stories worked on the page, whose problems I felt before it became clear to me what those problems were and how to represent them, and setting had a hand in allowing me to write these stories.

One aspect of my writing that still needs development is point of view. While I would like to use omniscience in a story and experiment more with less traditional points of view (such as second person and first-person-plural), I felt that it was affective to focus on one character per

story while at UCF. My biggest experiments in this thesis were “Hilum” and “Staring at the Moon,” the only first-person narratives. Balancing the right amount of thoughts and emotions with actions is a technique I constantly struggle with. Pacing and plot often come second to description in my initial drafts. For third-person point of view, I also had trouble getting close to the characters’ thoughts through language. James Woods discusses free indirect discourse in his book *How Fiction Works*. I used his examples as models for improving my use of language to show how characters think and feel, rather than saying “Sadie thought” or “Eve saw.” Jill McCorkle’s stories too are ideal representatives of stories without a traditional narrative arc, yet the strong voices of the narrators, the unique points of view, pull the reader through the stories. McCorkle almost writes as though the characters were telling the stories aloud and there is a strong oral quality to her free indirect discourse. The present action in “Going Away Shoes” and “Happy Accidents” is nearly non-existent—one narrator thinks about leaving her mother and the other fills in paint-by-numbers pictures—while the characters use the past to inform tension in the present moment.

One of the ways in which I feel that I am improving my use point of view has been in dialogue. When I came to UCF, I felt that writing dialogue was my weakest technique. Now I feel that I have a stronger grasp of presenting people’s speech naturally due in part to gaining more control of perspective. For example, in “Charleston Mud Hens,” the office scene between Barb and Sadie was more direct in the original dialogue. The interview was only one handwritten page long and a portion reads:

“Who’s coming to visit?” Sadie asked.

“*Southern Hospitality* is doing an interview,” Barb said.

“So send the unsmiling tattooed chick home for the day.”

“They want to highlight our local efforts, keeping it all in the region, so to speak.”

The later version reads:

“I need you to switch your morning shifts next week. Tuesday for Wednesday. We’ll need you to make the extras on Monday instead.” [Barb]

“Who’s coming to visit?” [Sadie]

“*Southern Hospitality* is doing a feature article. We get ten pages for recipes and pictures and interviews.”

“So stay in the back and don’t talk to anyone. Got it.”

“The title of the magazine is *Southern*. That puts a restriction on what we can highlight.”

“I’ve been here eight years, Barb. St. Clair is the only place I’ve ever called home. I’m more local than all the chain stores they let invade downtown.”

“Can’t help it.”

The second passage is more specific and more casual at the same time. Barb calls the event an “interview” at first, which does not make the media of the interview as clear as “feature article.” Sadie’s speech does just the opposite and gets less specific about her tattoos and attitude because those are clearer through later description as well as how she goes about baking.

Another of my writing’s weaknesses is that my stories are slow to deliver what is at stake for the main character, a problem linked to my lack of understanding of point of view. Most of my first drafts suffered from long beginnings and too subtle tension. “Tidal Motion,” “Renovations,” and “Charleston Mud Hens” all received this critique and were restructured to foreground conflict. However, I continue to wonder about the necessity of identifying the external conflict within the first page because stories such as Sherman Alexie’s “Saint Junior” and Lorrie Moore’s “Which Is More Than I Can Say About Some People” begin with a scene or

characters who disappear afterward and serve best as an introduction to the main character rather than as an illumination of conflict to come. What I feel is most important is getting to free indirect discourse, getting inside the character's mind, and delivering the promise of a rewarding, whole story not based upon a plot premise but because the voice is compelling.

I feel that I am a traditional author who experiments little with alternate structures or tone or other techniques. Also for Susan's Form and Theory class, I chose to report on John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. His theory of the fictional dream resonates well with me. He believes that authors should do nothing to interrupt from the "dream" they create in stories and in novels. The novel should be seamless, that its details should work toward creating believability, and that works need to be judged by their own merits through the plots and characters they create. While I do enjoy reading metafiction at times and enjoy stories with multiple perspectives that make you think about the truth of storytelling, I am most intrigued by stories that do not interrupt flow. When I am reminded that a story is a story, I am somewhat annoyed.

However, at the same time, I feel that the Lorena and Rosamond stories try to experiment with form. Using stories by Alexie, Moore, and McCorkle as examples, I tried to use extended flashbacks alongside present action. This organization feels more like the creative non-fiction structures in I read about in essays for Lisa Roney's mixed fiction-and-non-fiction workshop rather than what I have seen from most fiction short stories. I would like to continue experimenting with memory and the different ways that it can be presented in a work of fiction while at the same time not interrupting the fictional dream. Moore's and McCorkle's styles appeal to me especially, and I hope to continue developing my writing to rely less on traditional plot structures and more on voice. Particularly the oral quality of McCorkle's stories as well as

Daniel Wallace's *Mr. Sebastian and the Negro Magician* is something I would like to include more in my fiction.

The final largest influence on my writing has been Edmond White's novels, essays, and autobiographies. I read *Forgetting Elena* and *A Boy's Own Story* for the thesis, only two of many of his books. They belong to a type of writing I have called semi-autobiographical fiction in my essays on his works. I feel that characters and situations in *Renovations* have been taken from my life more than I usually rely on real events. Kayla in "Braids" is based largely on my sister. Sadie and I are alike in our tattoos and affinity for baking and cursing. The bullying Lorena underwent is based mostly on my childhood, as is her estrangement from her mother. Days before I wrote "Tidal Motion," the bar district near my undergraduate university flooded for five hours. While I feel that this exploration of parts of my life from different perspectives ties into my interests of identity and history, I do not see this trend continuing with my future fiction. I feel it is hard to sustain such substantive amounts of borrowing from my own life. Sometimes writing *Renovations* was emotionally draining due to this strong autobiographical nature, and I imagine that it would be hard to supply a lengthy writing career with parts of my own life.

For all of the self-assured statements of this essay, I still have more questions than answers, I still have many more stories to write than have been written. I have been a writer all of my life. From my earliest memories, I was writing plays for my stuffed animals and newscasts for my parents. I came back to writing in high school after a short stint as a math and physics student. Now, I cannot imagine a world without literature in it, without a job doing something related to authors, without writing or editing each day with a cup of tea sitting next to my laptop. At the end of a second thesis (this one twice as large as the first), I rather feel like Eve riding

away on the train in Ireland, not knowing what the future will bring, but hopeful that it will be better than what has come before.

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